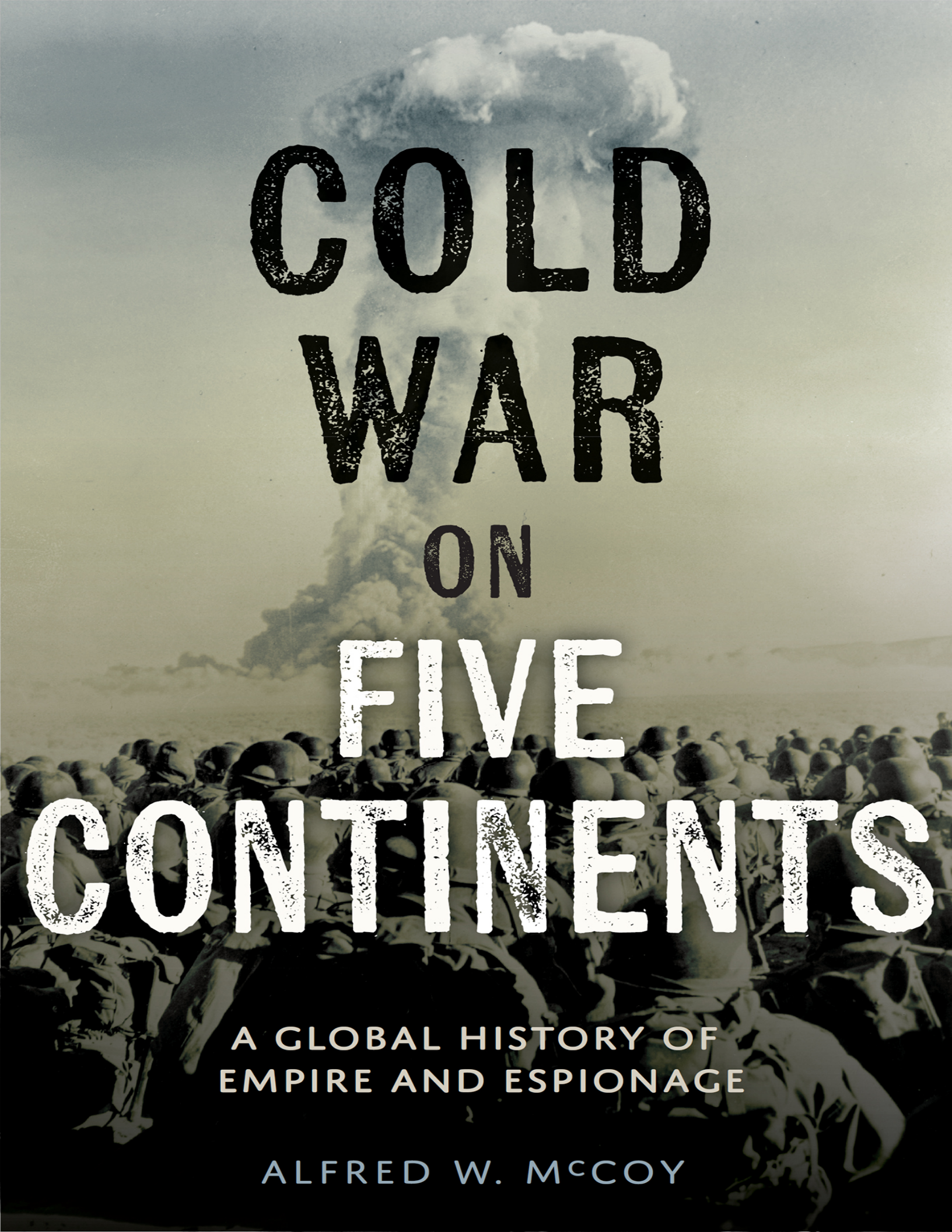




COLD WAR

ON

FIVE

CONTINENTS

A GLOBAL HISTORY OF
EMPIRE AND ESPIONAGE

ALFRED W. MCCOY



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PRAISE FOR

COLD WAR ON FIVE CONTINENTS

“*Cold War on Five Continents* is the culmination of a lifetime of research, analysis, and writing that began in the early 1970s when the author wrote *The Politics of Heroin*, which the CIA tried and failed to kill. In an age like ours when publishers, editors, and reporters bow down before the authorities and authority, Alfred McCoy proves he’s once again an American journalist who has mapped the road that the Cold Warriors have paved with the blood and the bones of humanity and who shows us where we need to go now to survive.”

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“Alfred W. McCoy continues his indispensable role as a guide through the shadow side of US empire. His most recent book, *Cold War on Five Continents: A Global History of Empire and Espionage*, should force us to rethink the postwar period, a sweeping, magisterial, and humane vision of how superpower rivalry was fundamentally a covert op and a psych war, and, in a way, a prelude to our current state of confusion. A tour de force.”

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“Sweeping, vivid, and provocative, Alfred McCoy has proven once again that few are his match when it comes to taking a probing, wide-angled lens to the troubles of our time. *Cold War on Five Continents* manages to span the globe and half a dozen decades, peopling that history with lively figures

and showing the larger patterns their roles fit into. An impressive achievement.”

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“While politicians pose for photos and speechify, actions by ‘the man on the spot’ determine the fate of nations and empires. Alfred McCoy’s compelling narrative describes the handiwork of the arrogant and eccentric oddballs who played pivotal roles during key moments of the Cold War and after. A brilliant, instructive, and deeply disturbing book.”

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“McCoy’s monumental achievement, carefully grounded in archives and primary accounts, lays bare the global desolation that attended the US-Soviet proxy wars during the Cold War, with millions killed and tens of millions driven into long-lasting poverty. Gimlet-eyed and searingly honest, it lays bare the true cost of letting ideology drive policy.”

—**Juan Cole**, Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History,
University of Michigan

“*Cold War on Five Continents* is a revelatory and gripping saga of global conflict. Distinguished historian Alfred McCoy melds the big picture of superpower rivalry with narratives of ‘men on the spot’—covert operatives who carried the struggle to the corners of the earth. McCoy deftly explicates how human agency as well as geopolitics defined the Cold War. The book should be the standard text in university courses to inform new generations about an era that cost twenty million lives. It should also be read in the halls of power to remind political leaders of the dangers of embracing a new Cold War.”

—**Derek Shearer**, former US ambassador to Finland and Chevalier
Professor of Diplomacy, Occidental College

COLD WAR ON FIVE CONTINENTS



Not Peace, but a Sword
A 1946 Herblock Cartoon, © The Herb Block Foundation

COLD WAR ON FIVE CONTINENTS

A GLOBAL HISTORY OF EMPIRE AND
ESPIONAGE

ALFRED W. McCOY


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*For my children, with love and thanks for their understanding,
Matthew, Michael, Margarita, and Cyrus*

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ABBREVIATIONS

<u>ADIZ</u>	Air Defense Identification Zone
<u>ARVN</u>	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
<u>AFL</u>	American Federation of Labor
<u>AFP</u>	Armed Forces of the Philippines
<u>CGT</u>	Confédération générale du travail (France)
<u>CIA</u>	Central Intelligence Agency
<u>DGI</u>	Dirección General de Inteligencia (Cuba)
<u>DINA</u>	Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (Chile)
<u>EGL</u>	Edward G. Lansdale Papers, Hoover Institution
<u>FBI</u>	Federal Bureau of Investigation
<u>FRUS</u>	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
<u>ICBM</u>	intercontinental ballistic missile
<u>IRD</u>	Information Research Department (Britain)
<u>JUSMAG</u>	Joint US Military Advisory Group
<u>KGB</u>	Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti (Soviet Union)
<u>MACV</u>	US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
<u>MI6</u>	Secret Intelligence Service (Britain), or <u>SIS</u>
<u>NARA</u>	National Archives and Records Administration
<u>NATO</u>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<u>NKVD</u>	Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del (Soviet Union)
<u>NSC</u>	National Security Council
<u>NVA</u>	North Vietnamese Army
<u>NYT</u>	<i>New York Times</i>
<u>OAS</u>	Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (France)
<u>OPC</u>	Office of Policy Coordination
<u>OPEC</u>	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

<u>OSS</u>	Office of Strategic Services
<u>PKI</u>	Partai Komunis Indonesia
<u>SIS</u>	Secret Intelligence Service (Britain), or <u>MI6</u>
<u>SDECE</u>	Service de documentation extérieure et de contreespionnage (France)
<u>UN</u>	United Nations
<u>US</u>	United States
<u>WP</u>	<i>Washington Post</i>

PREFACE

To write this book, it has taken me a long time to know what I know. Some fifty years ago, at the height of the Cold War, I took a semester off from Yale Graduate School, where I was pursuing a PhD in Southeast Asian history, to travel around the world, researching CIA operations and interviewing some of the era's most famous covert operatives. Back then, I mined those interviews for the bare facts of time, person, and place necessary for framing a narrative for my first book, *The Politics of Heroin*. Once that book was published in August of 1972, I put those encounters behind me and moved on to other topics.

But about four years ago when I started writing lectures for an undergraduate history course on the Cold War at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, those long-ago interviews kept intruding, not as mere facts but as a dazzling kaleidoscope of unsettling recollections. As I traveled some thirty thousand miles across three continents back in 1971, my mind was so bombarded by myriad sensations that my comprehension, at the age of twenty-six, was overwhelmed, unable to grasp but a fragment of those stimuli. In those travels, my main interlocutors were domineering, even ruthless men whom I did not merely meet, but who collided with my consciousness in ways that my mind—overcharged by fear, fascination, or both—could not fully comprehend at the time. Looking back, those travels to clandestine battlegrounds, meetings with CIA officers, and even the Agency's attempt to suppress my book constituted a master class in covert operations, albeit one whose lessons would have a long gestation.

In the years that followed those initial encounters, in some recess of my memory I was processing those sounds and sights into insights that now surfaced almost fully formed to inform this book. Instead of seeing these covert warriors as men who did this or that, I now saw beyond the three dimensions of their lived lives to grasp the fuller, fourth dimension of their impact as historical actors who not only lived in an era but also helped shape it in uncommon ways.

The raw emotional power of those encounters has been tempered by the more conventional tools of scholarship that ground such flashes of insight through annotation and reflection. About the same time that I was traveling the world, one of the seeds for the ideas that grew into this book was planted when, as a graduate student at Yale, I read a proof copy of Jonathan Spence's brilliant book *To Change China* and was struck by the impact that mere individuals, often imperial agents, could have upon the history of such a large, complex society. In an extraordinary coincidence, the editor of this book, Tom Engelhardt, began his own intellectual voyage as a researcher for Professor Spence, writing much if not most of that book's chapter on the role of "Chinese Gordon" in China's turmoil of the 1860s, introducing me to a figure whose parallels with the Cold War's covert operatives are discussed below. While also at Yale, I had the good fortune to study with the historian of empire David K. Fieldhouse, who led me to more of those legendary British adventurers whom historians now call "men on the spot," famous for expanding the frontiers of their global empire.

More broadly, the writing of this book has been a voyage of discovery, taking me far from my professional specialization in Southeast Asia to countries and whole continents beyond my ken. Yet, without that half century of immersion in the history of Southeast Asia, this global voyage would not have been possible. No other world region experienced, quite so forcefully, the full range of the Cold War's militarized violence—national revolution, communist revolt, army coups, aerial bombardment, conventional combat, covert intervention, warlord armies, systematic torture, and psychological warfare. Studying each of these forms of war in a Southeast Asian context over the years served to stock an analytical tool kit that has proved useful, even essential, in exploring later Cold War conflicts in other quarters of the globe.

As one of the earliest arenas for the Cold War's rivalries, Southeast Asia also produced an extraordinary cadre of covert operatives, several of whom I interviewed for that earlier book. In the course of that work years ago, I noted and wondered about the simultaneous appearance in the early 1950s of American, British, Dutch, and French counterinsurgency officers who seemed surprisingly influential in shaping the history of several Southeast Asian nations—but then I self-corrected and set that observation aside, dismissing it as a mere coincidence.

But now, placing those men (and they were nearly all men) on the spot in a global context for this book has led slowly to the realization that they were not only influential in their time and place, but were also exemplars of a recurring archetype that had so far eluded other historians of the Cold War. Though attired in the costume of contemporary espionage, their *modus operandi* and, ultimately, the global import of their actions looked strikingly similar to that of earlier imperial agents like Chinese Gordon. Once I began looking for such historical actors, those men on the spot kept arising almost assertively from the documents scattered across my desk, until I had found thirty of them, each one playing a significant role in Cold War “hot spots” on five continents. As they intruded into my narrative, I struggled to balance them against the usual, more impersonal factors historians deal with, trying to understand their influence as agents of historical change.

Probing these covert careers also allowed me further insights into the Cold War. Focusing on a historical actor whose role has played out again and again over the span of nearly two hundred years, from the 1830s to the 2020s, led me to see some deeper historical continuities that served to recast the character of the Cold War itself. Viewed from its peripheries in Manila or Luanda, rather than from the superpower capitals of Moscow and Washington, the Cold War no longer seems a unique contest between capitalism and communism. Instead, it becomes another chapter in a continuing, centuries-long struggle between rival empires, competing this time not just for lands, lucre, or even hegemony but for the ascent of an entire world order. Hopefully, both this broader historical approach and the close examination of these men on the spot will provide a new perspective on this much-studied global conflict called the Cold War.

Madison, Wisconsin

April 2025



Leader of the Russian Wagner mercenary group Yevgeny Prigozhin in the Sahel region of northern Africa, August 2023, just days before his death in an air crash in Russia. (Credit: Razgruzka Vagnera / UPI, Alamy)

CHAPTER 1

THE COLD WAR'S LONG SHADOW

When the thirtieth anniversary of the Cold War's end came in December 2021, there was little comment and even less commemoration. In the only official statement, Russian president Vladimir Putin called the breakup of the Soviet Union, which had ended the Cold War, “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” In words that soon gained weight, he added: “We lost 40 percent of the territory, production capacities and population. . . . What had been built over a millennium was lost.” Otherwise, the silence about what had been the longest conflict in modern history was, to say the least, surprising. Instead of commenting on that past, leaders and scholars alike were concerned about current international rivalries that threatened the world with what some called a “new Cold War.”¹

Within weeks of that forgotten anniversary, as Russia was massing 190,000 troops menacingly on the border with Ukraine, President Putin met China's Xi Jinping in Beijing, where they proclaimed a diplomatic entente “superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era.” They also demanded that the West “abandon the ideologized approaches of the Cold War” by curtailing both NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and similar security pacts in the Pacific.²

When the Ukraine war started and then quickly stalemated into months of meat-grinder combat, both sides made that Cold War analogy their diplomatic reality. Meeting at Madrid in June 2022, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) formalized a new geopolitical alignment that was strikingly similar to the old Cold War. Not only did NATO brand Moscow as its prime adversary and declare China a strategic “challenge,” but it also condemned their “deepening strategic partnership . . . and their . .

. attempts to undercut the rules-based international order.” In response, Putin shot back: “We will have to respond in kind and create the same threats.” Striking a similar note, China’s UN ambassador said: “The outdated Cold War script must not be reenacted in Asia Pacific.”³

In East Asia, there was also a tense standoff between Washington and Beijing over Taiwan that was strikingly reminiscent of the old Cold War. In October 2021, President Xi insisted that the “historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled.” But President Joseph Biden insisted that “U.S. forces . . . would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion.”⁴ As China’s jets flooded Taiwan’s airspace and US warships steamed defiantly through the Taiwan Strait, both powers plunged into costly naval construction programs.⁵

In analyzing these rising international tensions, a group of famously disputatious scholars, writing in the December 2021 issue of the journal *Foreign Affairs*, reached a clear consensus. “Today,” one of them said, “China and the United States are locked in what can only be called a new cold war.”⁶

Then, as the Ukraine war entered its second year with both armies mired in trench warfare, a mysterious figure, Yevgeny Prigozhin, emerged from the Kremlin’s clandestine shadows to shake President Putin’s grip on power. After denouncing the regime’s Ukraine strategy as a “racket,” Prigozhin, head of the Wagner mercenary army, launched a pell-mell advance of tanks and troop carriers toward Moscow—smashing through barriers, shooting down Russian aircraft, and making Putin look like a weakened strongman.⁷

Who was this extraordinary individual whose pique suddenly shook the world order? Emerging from Soviet prisons after a teenage mugging spree, Prigozhin rose, through Putin’s patronage, from a hot-dog vendor on the streets of St. Petersburg to a millionaire caterer for Russian troops. In 2014, his mercenary Wagner Group first appeared as the shadowy “little green men” during the Russian seizure of Crimea and then moved to Syria, where they committed atrocities. As the French retreated from their postcolonial imperium in northern Africa, Prigozhin’s mercenaries moved in. By the time France’s failing effort to secure Africa’s arid Sahel area from terrorists was drawing down in late 2022, Wagner was operating gold mines and providing security right across that sprawling region.⁸

INTRODUCING THE MAN ON THE SPOT

Even though Prigozhin was soon assassinated like so many of Putin's critics, his extraordinary career highlights an overlooked aspect of the Cold War's history: "the man on the spot."⁹ While most media focused on his conflict with Putin, it was Prigozhin's role as Moscow's agent in the great-power contest for control of northern Africa that makes him a significant historical figure. In a geopolitical flanking maneuver against Europe, Moscow used Wagner's mercenaries as a surrogate to win allies in seven countries across northern Africa, superseding both French and US military ties.¹⁰

Although Prigozhin's career seems, at first blush, extraordinary, the last two centuries of imperial history are populated with similar historical actors. During the nineteenth century, individuals like Cecil Rhodes played an outsized and open role in acquiring new territory for an expanding British Empire. Instead of the gentlemen adventurers like Rhodes for whom the term "man on the spot" was first coined, our Cold War analogs were usually, like Prigozhin, covert operatives. As crises erupted across five continents during the forty years of the Cold War, momentary ruptures in the world system allowed those individuals the autonomy for consequential covert action.

The historic British man on the spot operated within the simple constraints of their empire's expansion or non-expansion. But their Cold War counterparts gained autonomy for action through a more complex interplay of four key historical conditions—the relentless *superpower rivalry* between Moscow and Washington; the *geopolitics* that influenced the ever-shifting locus of Cold War crises; the *covert operations* that rival powers used to advance their hegemony without the risk of nuclear war; and the *decolonization* that opened new areas to superpower rivalry. Those four elements will drive this book's narrative across countries and continents, thereby revealing the surprisingly significant role of these men who have left their fingerprints, largely unnoticed, on the crime scenes of world history.

SUPERPOWER RIVALRY

With academics, media commentators, and national leaders all now agreeing that the world has entered a “new Cold War,” it is an opportune moment to reflect upon the overall character of the original Cold War, particularly the *superpower rivalry* that divided the globe for nearly half a century, 1947 to 1991.^{[11](#)}

The original Cold War was nothing less than the longest, largest, and most consequential conflict in the history of humankind, unleashing shock waves of social change that reverberated across five continents, touching almost every nation on the planet. Just as World War II shaped its postwar world, so the old Cold War has cast its long shadow from the mid-twentieth century deep into this one—shaping contemporary world politics and influencing international institutions. Nearly three-quarters of the world’s nations won their independence during the Cold War, yet that conflict’s global tensions troubled (even traumatized) their move to nationhood, leaving problems that persist to the present moment.

Analysis of this superpower rivalry might best begin by engaging the profound paradox that lies at the heart of the Cold War’s history. Although that conflict started and ended in Europe, most of its many battles were fought in the “Third World” of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Driven by a bitter competition that combined deep ideological differences with traditional hegemonic rivalry, both superpowers built up atomic arsenals so powerful that they could not risk any direct confrontation that might spark a nuclear war. As the nuclear arms race reached a strategic stalemate, Moscow and Washington shifted their rivalry to remote areas of secondary geostrategic significance, such as Afghanistan, Angola, and Vietnam, where they could fight more safely through local surrogates. Those secondary wars killed some twenty million people between 1945 and 1990, making the Cold War the world’s bloodiest conflict after World War II.^{[12](#)}

Many conventional histories treat the Cold War as a superpower rivalry focused largely, if not exclusively, on events in Moscow and Washington, while relegating the rest of the world to a distant battleground or even an afterthought.^{[13](#)} Such a focus emphasizes the more stable dimension of the Cold War—that is, the way the superpowers deployed massive armadas of nuclear-armed missiles and then negotiated “*détente*” to make certain that thermonuclear war never happened.^{[14](#)} Instead of emphasizing the diplomacy that led to such nuclear stability, this book focuses on the Cold War’s volatility—that is, the way superpower conflict and local context converged

to create surrogate wars in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. In effect, the full meaning of the Cold War becomes clearer by examining the impact of actual events, wars and revolutions, rather than focusing on a non-event, even one as potentially shattering as the thermonuclear World War III that, so far, has never happened.

Instead of a top-down Moscow-Washington perspective, this account takes a bottom-up, outside-in approach by exploring how disparate, localized conflicts shaped both the course and consequences of the Cold War. Rather than depicting this monumental event and its world system, ex post facto, in monolithic terms, this book will reconstruct its fractured history by tracing the course and confluence of key local conflicts. In almost every case, foreign intervention escalated local tensions into explosive conflagrations, producing events like the Congo crisis, the Vietnam War, and the Angolan civil war—crises that not only shaped the course of the Cold War but also left a legacy of traumatic violence that still haunts many societies, even decades after the local conflicts ended.

To cover such a sprawling global history, this narrative will follow the Cold War through three main phases over the span of forty years. In the first phase from 1946 to 1962, Europe became the main arena of superpower rivalry, as Moscow imposed its hegemony over Eastern Europe and Washington tried to secure Western Europe through CIA covert intervention and conventional military alliances. With the US determined to stop communist expansion in Southeast Asia, the Cold War's second phase, starting in the early 1960s, roiled that region with sanguinary psywar in Indonesia, conventional combat in South Vietnam, and air warfare in Laos and Cambodia. After conventional US forces were defeated and demoralized in Vietnam, Washington relied instead on CIA covert operations during the Cold War's final phase, 1975–91, to counter Soviet influence in Central America, Central Asia, and southern Africa. In a dramatic conclusion to the Cold War, millions of ordinary citizens worldwide took history into their hands by massing in “people power” protests in cities from Berlin and Bucharest to Prague and Warsaw, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

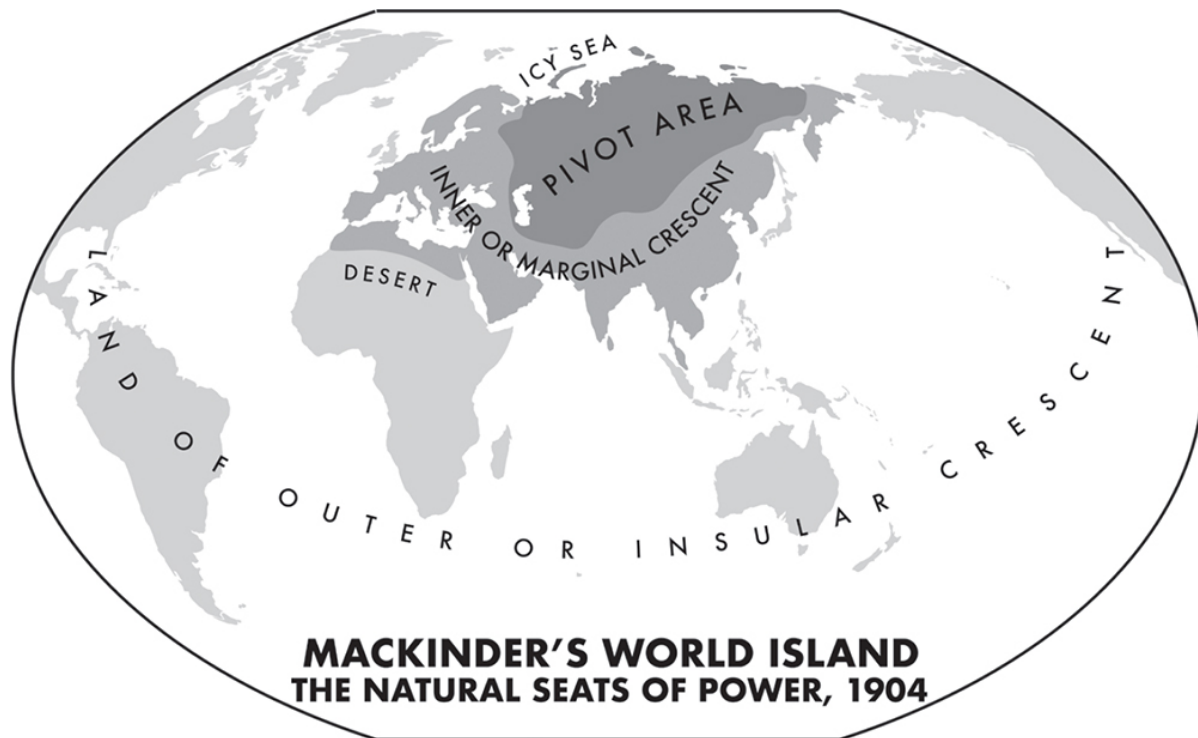
GEOPOLITICS

Analyzing such a vast struggle requires special tools. To follow the Cold War's sweep across the planet, we need to don the seven-league boots of *geopolitical analysis*, our second analytical tool, to leap from country to country, continent to continent.

At the high tide of the British Empire in 1904, an English geographer, Sir Halford Mackinder, published an influential article that launched the modern study of geopolitics. He argued that the construction of railroads like the Trans-Siberian one would soon knit Eurasia into a unitary landmass that, along with Africa, he dubbed the tri-continental "world island." When that day came, Russia—in alliance with another land power like Germany or, in our era, China—could expand across Eurasia's interior "pivot area" or "Heartland," allowing, Mackinder said, "the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would be in sight."¹⁵ At the end of World War I, Mackinder summarized his thoughts in a memorable maxim: "Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World."¹⁶

Within the vast expanse of the world island, Mackinder also identified a "marginal crescent" arching across the southern rim of Eurasia—from eastern Europe, through the Middle East, all the way to China—where the continent's major conflicts often occurred. Indeed, when Washington tried to contain the communist powers inside Eurasia's heartland during the Cold War, much of the fighting did indeed erupt in that "zone of conflict," creating a succession of international crises in Greece, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Egypt, and, finally, Afghanistan.¹⁷

Beyond all these particulars, Mackinder's often opaque Victorian prose masks a more fundamental observation: In the five hundred years since European exploration first brought the continents into continuous contact, the rise of every global hegemon has required dominance over Eurasia. Recognizing the centrality of that continent to global hegemony, Washington developed a supple geopolitical strategy to defeat the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As Oxford historian John Darwin has explained, the US achieved its "colossal Imperium . . . on an unprecedented scale" after World War II by becoming the first power in history to control the strategic axial points "at both ends of Eurasia."¹⁸



After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski updated Mackinder to make a quite similar point about the Cold War. “Geopolitically the struggle,” he explained, “was for control over the Eurasian landmass. . . . Each side understood that . . . the successful ejection of the one from the western and eastern fringes of Eurasia . . . would ultimately determine the geostrategic outcome of the contest.”¹⁹

If we probe deeper into the dynamics driving the Cold War’s relentless succession of conflicts, a more complex picture emerges: long-term geopolitical change seems to form an invisible substrate beneath the Eurasian landmass that shapes more superficial political struggles, much as the slow grinding of the planet’s tectonic plates becomes visible when volcanic eruptions break through the earth’s surface. Amid such ever-shifting geopolitical dynamics, a space or void in the world order sometimes opened, creating an opportunity for a mere human, usually an empowered covert operative, to somehow steer those overwhelming forces of historical change.

COVERT OPERATIONS

In a world where an overt military clash risked nuclear war, the superpowers found it safer to compete secretly through *covert operations*, our third analytical tool, thus investing their secret services with extraordinary authority and their clandestine operatives with exceptional autonomy. For the first time in history, the Cold War made espionage agencies key instruments of statecraft, compelling every major power to either create or expand its secret espionage service—including America’s CIA, the Soviet Union’s KGB, Britain’s SIS (also called MI6), and the French SDECE (Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage). At a formal bureaucratic level, this covert realm was much larger than even those agencies, with the CIA’s foreign operations complemented by the FBI’s domestic counter-intelligence and the National Security Agency’s signals intercepts. In addition to MI6 for foreign intelligence, Britain also had its domestic counterpart in MI5, a skilled signals agency at the General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), and a formidable psychological warfare (psywar) unit inside the Foreign Office, the Information Research Department (IRD).

More broadly, the growth of those secret services converged with the era’s expanding criminal syndicates to form an almost metaphysical space beneath the visible surface of politics, which I call “the covert netherworld.” Whether in Afghanistan, Central America, Italy, or Iran, the CIA frequently found that covert action required collaboration with criminal syndicates that shared its mastery of what Agency operative Lucien Conein called the “clandestine arts”—that is, the ability to conduct complex operations beyond the bounds of civil society—thereby giving the Agency useful allies in remote covert battlegrounds.^{[20](#)}

The Cold War was the golden age of espionage. In both the corridors of power and on the frontiers of empire, individual agents and their secret services achieved an extraordinary influence unlike anything they had experienced before or have experienced since. Through the National Security Agency’s surveillance and the CIA’s clandestine interventions on five continents, Washington’s covert operatives toppled governments, manipulated elections, and promoted coups to assure that national leaders on its side of the Iron Curtain that divided Europe would remain compliant “subordinate elites,” friendly to America.

At the start of the Cold War in mid-1947, Washington passed the National Security Act that created the CIA, initially for intelligence collection, not for covert action. Soon convinced, however, that covert operations were needed to check Soviet aggression, the State Department's George Kennan, architect of Washington's larger Cold War "containment" strategy, drafted a memo in May 1948 arguing that the US should respond to "aggressive Soviet political warfare" by mobilizing its own "resources for covert political warfare," which would include "clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements, 'black' psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states." More broadly, Washington should, said Kennan in another memo, "dispense with the aspiration to . . . a high-minded international altruism" and instead "deal in straight power concepts." In that spirit of *realpolitik*, the National Security Council quickly agreed, in Directive No. 10/2, to counter "the vicious covert activities of the USSR" by ordering that "the overt foreign activities of the US government must be supplemented by covert operations," which would include "sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and . . . subversion against hostile states," as well as "support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world."²¹ With six thousand covert-action personnel worldwide armed by a budget of \$82 million, President Dwight Eisenhower authorized 170 major CIA covert operations in forty-eight nations during the 1950s, making the Agency Washington's prime instrument for force projection in the Cold War's first, formative decade.²²

DECOLONIZATION AND THE COLD WAR

The coincidence between the Cold War and the *decolonization* of Europe's colonial empires, our final analytical tool, was one of the most consequential and least understood aspects of that global conflict. Many scholars see decolonization as a coda to nineteenth-century imperial history, treating it as a topic quite separate from the Cold War. Such accounts usually argue that decolonization's transformation of ten empires into a hundred newly independent nations was largely finished by the early 1970s, except for some "mini-states like the island republic of Nauru in the Pacific with 10,000 inhabitants."²³

In this book, by contrast, I will argue that the simultaneity of the Cold War and decolonization lent transformative power to both. By 1900, ten major empires had acquired 146 colonies covering 40 percent of the earth's land area, inhabited by a full third of humanity.²⁴ Instead of ending in 1975, decolonization continued until 1994 when the vast lands of southern Africa were finally freed from white settler rule. This precise coincidence between the Cold War (1947–91) and decolonization (1946–94) constantly opened new terrain for intense superpower competition, creating veritable voids in the world order that allowed an obscure covert operative to become a latter-day “man on the spot”—again and again.

THE MAN ON THE SPOT

Historians of the British Empire have frequently used the term “man on the spot” as a helpful device for explaining the seemingly inexplicable increase of its colonial territory. Despite Victorian England's formal policy of “non-expansion,” its empire grew relentlessly to cover a full quarter of the earth's surface by 1918, often through the efforts of individual adventurers or imperial viceroys—men operating almost alone on “turbulent frontiers.”²⁵ At moments of its expansion into new terrain, the British Empire invested certain individuals with the extraordinary power to change circumstances “on the spot”—thus, creating famed historical figures who merged person with place to become “Gordon of Khartoum,” Cecil Rhodes of “Rhodesia,” and Lawrence of Arabia.

In 1839, the traveler James Brooke sailed his yacht into Kuching harbor on Borneo's north coast and soon became “the White Rajah” of Sarawak, forming a private British colony that survived for over a century.²⁶ In Africa, Charles Gordon met a heroic death in 1885 as “Gordon of Khartoum,” inspiring the British conquest of Sudan.²⁷ Four years later, the “diamond king” Cecil Rhodes dispatched seven hundred mercenaries armed with Maxim machine guns that cut down thousands of Matabele fighters, subduing a vast territory that he dubbed Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe).²⁸ In West Africa, the legendary Frederick Lugard conquered all of Northern Nigeria in just three years and parlayed that success into becoming the first governor-general of the unified British colony, remaining

“imperious and stubborn, and constantly, like the true ‘man on the spot,’” relying “on distance from London . . . to allow him to have his way.”²⁹

As British influence expanded across the Middle East during and after World War I, a junior officer named T. E. Lawrence was given a free hand to organize an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire, and later—along with a rare woman on the spot, Gertrude Bell—helped his comrade in arms, Prince Faisal, become the first ruler of the Kingdom of Iraq, a British client state. Other such adventurers included “the wayward but brilliant” Arnold Wilson, who found himself administering the whole of Mesopotamia at the age of thirty-four, and Major Edward Noel, “who romped through Kurdish areas . . . reportedly inflating the expectations of its people as rapidly as Lord Curzon, the Acting Foreign Secretary, could dampen them.”³⁰

When the world order experienced another major transition driven by the decline of the British Empire after World War II, a new generation of imperial agents would play a similarly seminal role during the Cold War. As decolonization transformed fading colonial empires into a hundred new nations, rival superpowers dispatched covert operatives, latter-day men on the spot, to win over those emerging states by any means necessary. Just as colonial expansion had fostered the first men on the spot, so decolonization created a new generation of such empowered historical actors.

In the nineteenth century, travel to remote frontiers beyond the reach of telegraph had insulated Britain’s men on the spot from London’s authority, conceding them the freedom to seize new territory. Now, in an age of instant communications, their Cold War counterparts could nonetheless disappear into a covert netherworld, loosening Washington’s controls and freeing them to plot coups, mobilize armies, and install governments.

These ambitious, cunning, and often amoral Cold War operatives were usually marginal or even inconsequential figures at home. But at evanescent moments of geopolitical rupture, when a veritable power vacuum opened in the world order, such otherwise obscure figures could gain sufficient autonomy, often amplified by loose orders and limited oversight, to exercise an outsized influence on the historical process. During the Cold War’s frequent crises, some two dozen of these men on the spot turned up in cities scattered across five continents—Athens, Jakarta, Manila, Saigon, Vientiane, Tehran, Kinshasha, Luanda, Paris, and even Washington, DC. By plotting clandestine operations to bring a contested terrain within their respective spheres, these secret agents could overcome their inherent

inconsequence as individual historical actors to effect consequential historical change.

If we weave their wispy biographical threads into a historical tapestry known as “prosopography,” or collective biography, among the thirty men on the spot identified in this account, nineteen were born between 1908 and 1927, and almost all of them fought in World War II, thus forming a distinct generation that emerged battle-hardened for the extraordinary demands of a clandestine career. Reflecting the global reach of American hegemony, as well as the way the bureaucratic style of Soviet espionage precluded such individual initiative, eighteen of these thirty operatives were Americans. Another four were French, four were British, and the remaining four were from diverse backgrounds (Chilean, Cuban, Dutch, and Vietnamese).

By their numbers, diversity, and evanescence, these men were *not* Friedrich Hegel’s “world-historical individuals” like Julius Caesar or Napoleon Bonaparte. As a young man in 1806, the philosopher Hegel saw Napoleon riding out for reconnaissance on the eve of battle against Prussia and called him a “world soul on horseback” who “reaches out over the world and masters it.” Twenty years later in his *Philosophy of History* an aging Hegel argued that such world-historical figures were “agents of . . . a step in the progress of the universal Spirit” toward freedom. Finding the “kernel” of historical change ready to burst forth from its shell, they released it, just as Julius Caesar’s many conquests “fulfilled the necessary historical destiny of Rome and the world.” When these figures finished serving history, however, “they fall off like empty hulls from the kernel. They die early like Alexander, they are murdered like Caesar, transported to Saint Helena like Napoleon.”³¹ Thus, the author of this impersonal, even mechanistic view of history still found a place for the individual actor, if only for the greatest of them.

Instead of shaping history’s grand design, our more modest men on the spot maneuvered at its margins, exploiting imperial transitions to nudge a nation in the desired direction, which was rarely, if ever, the path of progress toward Hegel’s greater good. When infused with the power of a rising hegemon, those men were capable of actions that expanded their empire’s ambit. If, by contrast, their empire was receding, these efforts, no matter how skilled, could not stem that ebbing tide. Lacking anything akin to the grandeur of Caesar, Napoleon, or even Henry Kissinger, their lives

were marked by ordinariness, even obscurity—yet they still experienced fleeting moments at the epicenter of historical change.

During the Cold War's first decades, the CIA's version of these men on the spot produced a succession of seemingly stunning covert victories that created a pantheon of putative American heroes. Presidential grandson Kermit Roosevelt Jr. conducted a daring coup that secured Iran's oil industry for the West. Simultaneously, as the French retreated in defeat from South Vietnam, the "Quiet American" Edward Lansdale preempted a communist takeover by installing a pro-American leader in Saigon. A decade later, Lansdale's CIA comrade Lucien Conein fomented a coup to kill that same president, inadvertently plunging Saigon into a sustained political crisis that precipitated American military intervention. On another continent, CIA station chief Larry Devlin formed a pliable if kleptocratic regime out of the chaos in postcolonial Congo. In the Cold War's final phase, CIA officer John Stockwell went from commanding the Agency's clandestine intervention in Angola to becoming his country's foremost critic of covert operations. By acting as what one US president called "the guy on the ground," these individual CIA operatives had both the adaptability and local knowledge to carry out their covert missions with consistent success—in contrast with recurring debacles by the Agency's bureaucracy, whether in Cuba, Indonesia, or South Vietnam.³²

While American agents, armed with the peerless power of their country's global hegemony and countless millions in cash, were the most successful, they were by no means alone in this shadowy interstice of international politics.³³ Only a month after Indonesia won independence from the Netherlands in 1949, Dutch operative Raymond "the Turk" Westerling launched an abortive plot to slaughter the new nation's cabinet and bring Indonesia back within Amsterdam's ambit. As superpower rivalry over Southeast Asia intensified in the 1960s, British psywar expert Norman Reddaway disseminated sordidly skillful propaganda that facilitated the Indonesian military's slaughter of a million suspected subversives, thereby destroying that country's massive communist party. In wartime Saigon, communist spy Pham Xuan An used his cover as a *Time* magazine reporter for espionage seminal to a succession of US defeats during the Vietnam War. In Angola, the Cuban revolutionary Jorge Risquet spent several years coordinating Cuban and Soviet support for the country's Marxist

government fighting, and defeating, a formidable tandem of CIA cash and South African firepower.

As a foreign operative dropped *deus ex machina* into an alien society, the man on the spot needed local allies to use as an Archimedean lever to lift their society in the desired direction. Embodying the power of an empire, such agents could readily attract influential locals. Indeed, it was their role as political brokers between those local allies and a far-off imperial metropole that gave them a certain autonomy of action, arguably their defining attribute as historical actors. Although celebrated as heroes in the capitals of empire, their covert manipulations could disrupt a subject society's delicate political balance, plunging an entire people into long years of political instability.

These men on the spot not only acted but *interacted* within that intelligence interstice called the covert netherworld in ways that often had profound consequences for their clandestine missions. In his struggle to win South Vietnam for Washington in the 1950s, CIA operative Edward Lansdale had to best his French counterpart Antoine Savani at every turn. Not only did Lansdale secure Saigon for the United States, but in doing so he gave a local asset, Pham Xuan An, training that allowed him to become such a skilled communist spy, much to Washington's later detriment. Through his writings about the French colonial war in Algeria, their man on the spot Roger Trinquier shaped US counterinsurgency strategy in the Vietnam War, particularly for the CIA. And the French spymaster Jacques Foccart's maneuvers to eliminate an African opponent through a brilliantly executed aircraft hijacking inadvertently allowed the CIA to consolidate its control over Congo's government.

When all that work was done and the contested territory won, the bureaucrats of empire, diplomats and soldiers, arrived to staff that new imperial outpost, leaving the once-omnipotent agent with only an old man's tales to tell. And, oh my heavens, did they tell tales. Their dozens of sometimes turgid memoirs—all of which I have dutifully read and cited in the chapters below—are usually so self-exculpatory or self-celebratory that they provide historians little more than some useful anecdotes.

Fortuitously for this project, earlier research gave me some personal insight into the character of those covert operatives. A trip to Paris allowed me an evening with the most memorable of them, Colonel Roger Trinquier. As a paratrooper in the French colonial army, he was famed for his ruthless

logic about the imperative of using torture against insurgents, whether in Algeria or wherever they might appear. On the surface, our three-hour interview was a polite chat. But subliminally he somehow cast an aura of dominance that slowly drained my self-confidence, even though I was seated comfortably, sipping tea, taking notes until I stumbled out of his apartment, utterly exhausted. That experience left me with an indelible lesson about the overweening willpower that carried otherwise ordinary men to such heights, or depths, of achievement.

Not only do their stories serve to humanize a Cold War history often told in terms of impersonal factors like nuclear arsenals or diplomatic ententes, but their clandestine careers also provide a thread of narrative tension that will carry this account of that global conflict from chapter to chapter to a dramatic denouement. But perhaps most importantly, following these men into their clandestine shadowlands reminds us that empire, and the clash of empires that was the Cold War, was and remains a dirty business. Watching General Pinochet's man on the spot, the American assassin Michael Vernon Townley, murder some of Chile's finest leaders shows that the allure of espionage was largely a fiction, a cinematic fabrication. Indeed, the covert interventions so central to the Cold War, which these men embodied, relied on some of the cruelest instruments in the tool kit of modern statecraft—assassination, coup d'état, mass murder, psychological manipulation, surrogate warfare, torture, and terror. So it was for the old Cold War, and so it may yet be for the new Cold War that now seems to be following in its wake.

GENERATIONS OF ACTIVISTS

Just as those men on the spot played a central role in the crises that marked the Cold War's first two decades, so younger generations of protest leaders were seminal in shaping the course of its closing decades. During the late 1960s, youth activists would lead the large postwar "baby boom" generation in mass anti-war protests that pressed the White House to withdraw US troops from South Vietnam. In the early 1980s, millions of anti-nuclear marchers filled city streets in the US and Europe, demanding, with some success, progress toward nuclear disarmament. Other mass protests soon followed, notably the "sanctuary" movement for Central

American refugees in churches across America and the anti-apartheid campaign in Britain and the US, with both protests demanding an end to Cold War conflicts that inflicted much misery on the peoples of southern Africa and Central America. In a dramatic climax to this decade of mass demonstrations, the “people power” uprisings by millions of citizens in cities across Eurasia would topple autocratic governments in both East and West, serving as a catalyst for the collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War.

As tens of millions of citizens, embodying their nation’s sovereignty, took to the streets in cities around the world during that tumultuous decade of the 1980s, the faceless “crowd” would once again become a force that helped change the course of world history. Indeed, historian Eric Hobsbawm once called it “the form of social agitation with the longest record of continuous existence.” Just as the “man on the spot” arises from British imperial history to shape our understanding of the Cold War’s early conduct, so the “crowd,” often overlooked in standard historical accounts, emerges from Europe’s preindustrial centuries to help explain the Cold War’s ending.³⁴

At critical points in the Cold War’s history, mass movements served to break the stasis, even paralysis, in international politics that had transformed a global rivalry into a permanent state of war that dragged on, decade after decade, for an extraordinary forty-four years. Despite striking differences in their domestic governance, Moscow and Washington developed similar strategies for waging this incessant war. With their enormous standing armies and deep ideological commitments to the struggle, both superpowers reacted reflexively to any challenge, whether it was Washington fighting communist guerrillas in South Vietnam or Moscow crushing anti-communist protests in Eastern Europe. As the Cold War moved into a second and third decade, the superpowers negotiated some rules of engagement that served not to end the conflict but instead to allow its ceaseless continuation. Locked into such a relentless rivalry, both sides built security states whose default mode was war without end, whether pursuing regional wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan to the brink of self-destruction or reacting to any nuclear threat with escalation toward extinction. Warfare, the usual means of resolving such great-power rivalry, was an impossibility in the atomic age, denying diplomats in Washington and Moscow any means for ending this endless conflict.

At critical turning points in the Cold War, however, those mass protests served as a political wedge that broke through the frozen diplomacy and pushed the powers toward disarmament and disengagement. In many ways, therefore, the history of that global conflict can be written as the story of generations, both the older cold warriors who waged this war by conventional or covert means and the younger leaders of protest movements that challenged the entrenched apparatus of power, moving humankind into a new era free to engage more serious global problems like climate change. By showing how otherwise ordinary individuals helped end that monumental war and its threat of nuclear holocaust, this history offers insights about the possibilities of change for today's younger generations, who are facing the challenge of climate change in a world where the great powers are devoting humanity's scarce resources to a "new cold war."

PART ONE

**THE STRUGGLE OVER EUROPE
AND ITS COLONIAL EMPIRES**



United World Federalist president and future CIA official Cord Meyer testifies before the House Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, 1948. (Credit: Thomas D. McAvoy / LIFE Picture Collection, Shutterstock)

CHAPTER 2

USA VS. USSR

In March 1946, only months after the end of World War II, Britain's former prime minister Winston Churchill stood in the gymnasium of a small Missouri college and offered this warning to the world. "From . . . the Baltic to . . . the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent," he intoned. "Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe . . . and all are subject . . . to . . . control from Moscow. Athens alone—Greece with its immortal glories—is free to decide its future at an election." He then added: "In a great number of countries . . . throughout the world, . . . Communist parties or fifth columns constitute a growing challenge and peril to Christian civilization."¹

Indeed, the Cold War was fast taking shape as a struggle between rival civilizations—Christianity versus communism, democracy versus dictatorship, freedom versus totalitarianism. The two superpowers that would fight the Cold War were diametrically different in such fundamental ways, and yet, in certain critical aspects, they were also strikingly similar. As combatants locked into a total war that would last more than forty years, both Moscow and Washington had to match the other's tactics on diverse battlegrounds. Both powers devoted substantial portions of their economies to producing atomic warheads, ballistic missiles, strategic bombers, and nuclear submarines. In the desperate game of Cold War espionage, both sides built powerful secret services, the CIA versus the KGB, and allowed them enormous influence over their respective societies and international spheres. Both powers ruled those spheres with a tough realpolitik that combined ideological camaraderie with ruthless political manipulation.

Although the armaments and espionage on both sides of the Iron Curtain were quite similar, the societies that produced them were markedly different. As an authoritarian state ruled by a single party, Moscow also had the advantage of rapid mass mobilization. But as a command economy with

a weak consumer base, it lacked America's free-market dynamism and fiscal resources to sustain a costly superpower rivalry over the long term. As a socialist society ideologically opposed to exploitation, the Soviet Union had a more immediate attraction for both workers in industrial societies and new nations emerging from imperial rule. By contrast, the United States, with its advocacy of democracy and development, appealed more to educated elites in both developed and developing societies.

To win the war of ideas, which lay at the core of the Cold War, Moscow and Washington used different methods to impose ideological conformity on their side of the Iron Curtain. As a socialist society, the Soviet Union was relatively open when it mobilized intellectuals at home and abroad. But as a democracy that valorized freedom above all else, the United States found that it had to co-opt its supporters covertly, using clandestine interventions abroad and secret subsidies at home. Even now, decades after the Cold War's end, few Americans appreciate the extraordinary extent of the CIA's clandestine recruitment of their country's creative classes.

THE SOVIET UNION

From its founding in 1917, the Soviet Union had made Moscow the center of a Communist International, or Comintern, dedicated to advancing proletarian revolutions in industrial nations and fighting colonialism in Africa and Asia. In an age of industrial capitalism and imperialism, both the leaders of Europe's trade unions and nationalists in the colonized countries of Africa and Asia had, since the 1870s, read Marxist texts as guides to a more just social order. Karl Marx's main work, *Das Kapital*, was too dense for anyone but communist apparatchiks or academics to handle. But the simple, direct language of his 1848 *Communist Manifesto* appealed to Europe's workers through its critique of capitalism and its call for "forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions." As World War I was slaughtering soldiers in unprecedented numbers, Vladimir Lenin published a treatise titled *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which critiqued the conflict as a "predatory war of plunder . . . a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies."²

After decades of broken strikes, mass arrests, and failed uprisings, those texts and their followers finally triumphed in 1917 when Lenin and the

Bolsheviks seized power in Russia and established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or U.S.S.R. Lenin's immediate successor, Joseph Stalin, would then lead the Soviets to victory over Nazi Germany during World War II and, in the postwar period, compensate for his state's economic weakness with territorial expansion. For Moscow had emerged from World War II victorious but devastated, its economy in disarray, twenty-six million of its most productive citizens dead, and its military committed to a costly occupation of Eastern Europe.³

Adopting a defensive foreign policy, Stalin built a buffer zone along the Soviet Union's frontier by forging a chain of twenty-two satellite states and captive republics into an empire reaching from Estonia in the north to Bulgaria in the south. "Soviet leaders were not focused on promoting worldwide revolution," historian Melvyn Leffler wrote in 1996 after reviewing research from the Soviet archives. "They were concerned mostly with configurations of power, with protecting their country's immediate periphery, ensuring its security, and preserving their rule." To achieve nuclear parity with the US, which had dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, Lavrentiy Beria, boss of the NKVD secret police, supervised a crash program to build a bomb that culminated in a successful nuclear test in August 1949, sparking the rapid construction of an atomic arsenal to rival America's.⁴ In the decade following that test, the Soviets built a substantial force of 870 nuclear weapons, though the US had a staggering 9,800 warheads to compensate for its inferiority in conventional forces.⁵ By the mid-1950s, Churchill's imagined "iron curtain" had become an armed reality that divided Europe into rival spheres, with 175 Red Army divisions facing just 20 active-duty divisions from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁶

With its centralized command economy, the Soviet Union had an exceptional capacity for rapid social mobilization, whether press-ganging 300,000 laborers to build the Baltic–White Sea Canal in the 1930s or sending 250,000 pioneers and 200,000 tractors to plow 74 million acres in Kazakhstan during the Virgin Lands campaign of the mid-1950s.⁷ Yet that same command economy suffered from lackluster annual economic growth of 2.5 to 3 percent even at its peak in the 1960s—far below West Germany's solid 5.5 percent, Italy's impressive 8 percent, and Japan's sizzling 10 percent.⁸ But whatever it may have lacked as an economic

engine, the Soviet state was extraordinarily efficient in mobilizing every sector of its society for Cold War competition—including, the Academy of Sciences, Central Council of Trade Unions, Women’s Union, Writer’s Union, Young Pioneers, and so on.

By the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union had emerged from the devastation of World War II and Stalin’s domestic terror to exercise dominion over an empire of republics and satellite states. After heavy wartime losses, the Soviet population had bounced back to 220 million in 1950, 50 percent larger than America’s population of 150 million. Simultaneously, the Soviet economy showed steady growth, doubling in size from a gross national product per person of \$300 in 1928 to \$600 in 1950 (compared with \$1,800 for the United States). By the 1960s, overall living standards for Soviet citizens were rising, with free education, health care, childcare, paid leave, and old-age pensions. Apart from such essentials, wages were sufficient for a reliable food supply and occasional purchases of consumer goods like cars, refrigerators, and television sets. In managing the Soviet command economy, the Communist Party was determined to avoid incidents like the 1962 riots in the city of Novocherkassk, where workers shouting “Milk, Meat, and Higher Wages!” occupied police headquarters until the KGB killed thirty demonstrators to restore order.⁹

Although the Red Army quickly demobilized from eleven million men in 1945 to just three million in 1948, a steady supply of new recruits through a mandatory three years of military service for all males allowed it ample manpower, while large defense budgets ensured the technological innovations that, by the mid-1950s, made it the world’s most powerful military. By then, the Red Army’s ground force was heavily mechanized with a massive tank corps and motor rifle divisions. The Soviet aeronautics industry produced a succession of strategic bombers and superior jet fighters, starting with the 1947 model MiG-15, the first mass-produced jet fighter; next, the 1952 model MiG-19, the first mass-produced supersonic fighter; and the MiG-25 in 1970, the world’s fastest production aircraft.¹⁰ Similarly, the Soviet Navy grew steadily throughout the Cold War into a thousand-ship armada by 1991, with 168 nuclear-powered submarines, 130 diesel submarines, 37 destroyers, 30 cruisers, and 5 aircraft carriers.¹¹

After five years of a US nuclear monopoly, Washington was shocked in 1949 when the Soviets drew on the work of its own scientists and secrets stolen by spies like the physicist Klaus Fuchs to test its first atomic bomb.

In response, the US tested the hydrogen bomb in 1952, which was 450 times more powerful than the device that destroyed Hiroshima. But just nine months later the Soviets tested a similar weapon. By the close of the Cold War in 1991, the Soviet Union had the world's largest nuclear stockpile with 35,000 warheads compared to the US (19,000), France (540), Britain (422), and China (234).¹²

With captured German scientists, the Soviet Union also made early strides in rocketry during the first decades of the Cold War, developing a series of missiles based on the Nazi V-2 that culminated in the creation of the R-7—the world's first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which launched Sputnik, the world's first satellite, in 1957. By then, the Soviets had also developed the R-11 surface-to-air missile, whose 150-mile range became the basis for Moscow's intermediate-range ballistic missiles for both land launchers and submarines. By 1966, the Soviets started developing the R-36 ICBM, which had a maximum range of ten thousand miles and payload of multiple nuclear warheads, giving Moscow first-strike advantage in a nuclear war.¹³

In sum, throughout most of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was a formidable military power, capable of defeating NATO in a land war in Central Europe, devastating the United States in a nuclear war, and matching American military power in the air and at sea.

US GLOBAL POWER

Not only did the United States become a major global power during World War II, but Washington came to see itself as a beacon for democracy, fighting authoritarianism in all its forms, whether fascist or communist. Caught between those two authoritarian extremes during the 1930s, liberalism seemed a weak alternative, with only a dozen functioning electoral democracies anywhere in the world. Against all odds, however, the world's democracies, together with the USSR, defeated the Axis alliance of fascist powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—amid the unprecedented devastation of World War II that left seventy-seven million people dead.

To counter Axis propaganda during the war, the Allies, led by America and Britain, forged a common commitment to a postwar world in which all the world's peoples would live as equals within their own sovereign states.

At the war's start in January 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed his famous four freedoms—of speech and worship as well as from want and fear. In August 1941, President Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill issued the Atlantic Charter from the deck of a British battleship, promising to “respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.”¹⁴

Washington's visionary world order took form during two major wartime conferences—at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in 1944, where forty-four Allied nations forged an international financial system managed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and at San Francisco in 1945, where they drafted a United Nations charter to create a postwar community of nations. In essence, the UN Charter's many clauses rested on just two foundational principles: inviolable national sovereignty and universal human rights. Two years later, Washington led the world's major trading nations in signing the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, which was succeeded by the World Trade Organization in 1995—cutting their average tariffs from 22 percent in 1947 to just 3 percent by 1999.¹⁵ By the end of World War II in 1945, fascism had been destroyed, leaving just two rival ideological systems ready to contend for global dominion in what would soon become the Cold War—the Communist bloc based in Moscow and the Western alliance led by Washington.

Paralleling its rather idealistic international system, Washington also exercised unprecedented global power by forming a foreign policy apparatus with four essential elements—economic, military, diplomatic, and, most critically, clandestine.

The first element, indeed the foundation for Washington's global hegemony, was an economy of exceptional strength. Not only did the United States account for half of global output at the end of World War II, but the international economy it built at Bretton Woods in 1944 was based on the US dollar, which had already surpassed the British pound to become the world's leading currency. When Moscow refused to join the IMF, President Harry Truman could justifiably claim: “We are the giant of the economic world.” In 1947, that economic strength would allow Washington to launch the Marshall Plan that provided an unprecedented \$13 billion in foreign aid for European reconstruction, sparking a quarter-century of sustained growth and encouraging the continent's economic integration.¹⁶

The second key element of Washington's global power was a mighty military with hundreds of overseas bases, a formidable nuclear arsenal, massive air and naval forces, and a potent array of allied armies. In comparison with the Soviet Union, America's key strategic advantage lay in the global reach of its air armada. During World War II, its aerospace factories had built 299,000 military aircraft, and the Army Air Forces had trained 193,000 advanced pilots, giving the US the infrastructure for the postwar growth of its airpower.¹⁷

By the end of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency in 1960, moreover, the Pentagon had built a "nuclear triad" that gave Washington a "strategic deterrent" to counter Sino-Soviet superiority in conventional forces. As the US Navy's fleet of five nuclear-powered submarines cruised the ocean depths, each carrying sixteen nuclear-armed Polaris missiles, its fourteen aircraft carriers, including the atomic-powered USS *Enterprise*, were also equipped for nuclear strikes. Moreover, the Strategic Air Command had 1,700 bombers ready to drop nuclear payloads on the Communist bloc, including six hundred behemoth B-52s with a range of four thousand miles. The Air Force had also developed Atlas and Titan ballistic missiles that could carry nuclear warheads more than six thousand miles. By 1960, the Pentagon had formed the Single Integrated Operational Plan for a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union and China that would, in the event of war, launch 3,200 nuclear weapons to destroy 130 cities and kill 280 million people. To sustain this massive force, the US would spend a total of \$12.4 trillion on defense from 1950 to 1990, for an average of \$303 billion per year—far more than any other nation.¹⁸

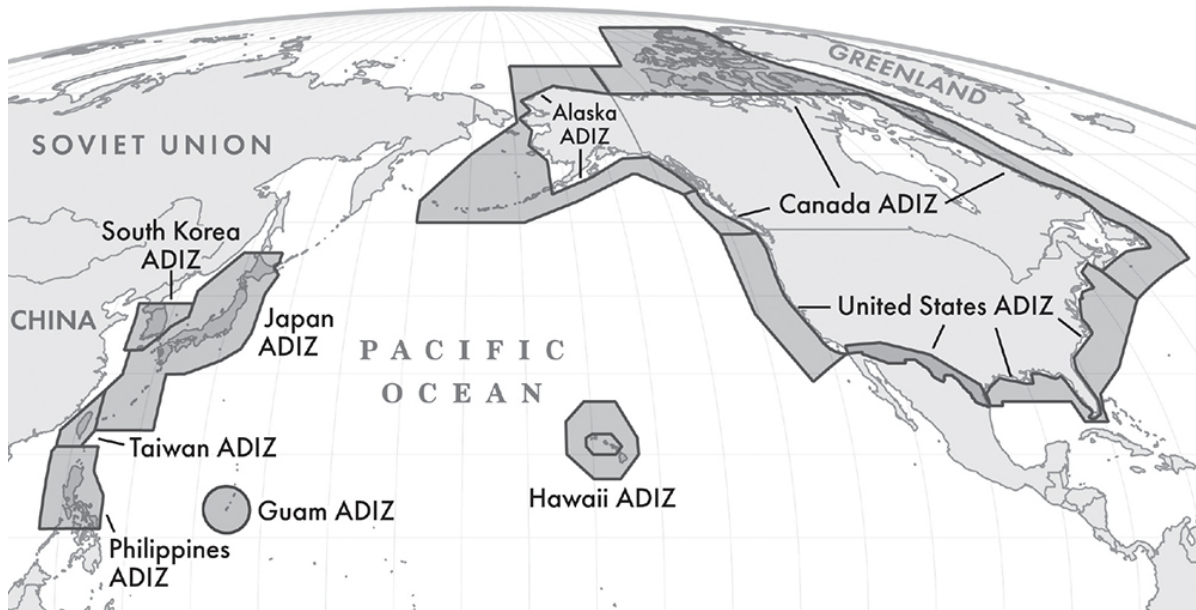
Ten years after the end of World War II, Washington already had five hundred overseas military bases ringing Eurasia, a number that would grow to eight hundred by the Cold War's end. The US gained access to these bases through a chain of mutual-defense pacts reaching around the Eurasian landmass from Europe, across the southern rim of Asia, and along the Pacific littoral from Australia to Japan.¹⁹ At the start of the Cold War in 1947, Washington also signed the Rio Treaty with Latin American republics, whose principle of collective defense secured the Western Hemisphere from communist "infiltration." Within this array of alliances, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would become the strategic cornerstone of US global power. In April 1949, Washington and Ottawa had

led ten European nations from Denmark to Italy in signing this mutual defense pact.^{[20](#)}

Within a year, the Truman administration adopted National Security Council Memorandum No. 68, whose geopolitical insight would guide US foreign policy for the rest of the Cold War. “The Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to hegemony,” it said, “is animated by a new fanatic faith anti-thetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world. . . . To that end Soviet efforts are now directed toward domination of the Eurasian land mass.” To counter such aggression, Washington should, the document added, undertake a massive rearmament as a way to encourage “the rapid building up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world.”^{[21](#)}

In January 1951, the National Security Council (NSC) compiled a top-secret report (No. 100) warning that “the United States is now in a war of survival,” which it was, in fact, losing. If the Cold War were to erupt into actual combat in Europe, the NSC warned, the small force of ten US Army divisions there would be quickly crushed by the Soviets’ 175 divisions. Consequently, Washington’s strategy must change fundamentally so “the whole of NATO, as well as the Far Eastern commitments of the United States, are to be supported by reliance upon the strategic air power” for the delivery of an expanded “atomic stockpile.” Further, the US needed to match its NATO commitment by building a “position of strength in the Far East, thus obtaining an active strategic base against Russia in the event of general war with the Soviets.”^{[22](#)}

U.S. & Allied Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ)



With surprising speed, American diplomats implemented the NSC's new strategy by signing treaties that encircled the entirety of Eurasia with rings of steel in the form of air bases and mutual defense pacts. After transforming NATO into an expressly military alliance, Washington filled the vast, vulnerable space along Eurasia's long southern flank with two more mutual-defense pacts—METO (Middle East Treaty Organization) and SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). Along the length of the Pacific littoral, Washington also negotiated, from 1951 to 1954, five bilateral defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Australia. In an April 1954 letter to NATO's commander, President Eisenhower explained the imperative of such alliances, saying: "No Western power can go to Asia militarily, except as one of a concert of powers, which concert must include local Asiatic peoples. To contemplate anything else is to lay ourselves open to the charge of imperialism and colonialism or—at the very least—of objectionable paternalism."²³ Completing its 360-degree encirclement of the sprawling Eurasian continent, in 1957 the US formed the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) with Canada, deploying a massive armada of missiles, bombers, and early-warning radar to check the threat of Soviet attacks across the Arctic.²⁴

Within a decade, this array of American alliances had become nothing less than an aerial rampart floating above and around the whole of Eurasia, superseding the aerial sovereignty of dozens of allied nations that allowed the US Air Force to fly foreign skies as if they were its own. Washington then restructured the world's airspace through new legal definitions for both the *height* and *extent* of national sovereignty. At Chicago in December 1944, the US had led its allies in adopting the International Civil Aviation Convention (ICAO), which gave every nation "exclusive sovereignty over the air space above its territory." But the convention did not specify whether "air space" meant seven miles high to the troposphere (where propeller-driven aircraft can fly) or three hundred miles to the thermosphere (where satellites orbit)—an ambiguity that gave the US Air Force de facto freedom of the world's skies. In December 1950, moreover, the US, followed by Canada five months later, extended its sovereign airspace far beyond the 3-mile limit to 250 miles by declaring an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) around North America, making all foreign aircraft without approved flight plans "subject to interception."²⁵

During the next two years, the US worked with its four Asian allies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines) to declare an ADIZ over their territories, thereby creating a unified air defense zone covering the entire Pacific littoral. Although the creation of these zones was unilateral and so had no basis in international law, in 1958 the Joint Chiefs proposed that American bases in the Far East be allowed to intercept Soviet-bloc aircraft deemed "manifestly hostile in intent."²⁶ Not only was North America now surrounded by an air defense zone, but the entire Pacific was secured behind an aerial shield extending from Alaska to northern Japan and the central Philippines.

Whether negotiating mutual security pacts, courting European allies, or forging consensus at the UN, diplomacy would supplement the country's raw economic and military strength, becoming an important third element in Washington's array of global power. At the close of World War II, the State Department recognized that the "demand for freedom . . . has increased in strength and insistence" in the colonies of its European allies and adopted a cautious policy "which would allow colonial peoples an opportunity to prepare themselves for . . . eventual self-government." As decolonization progressed and the number of UN member nations doubled from 60 in 1952 to 122 by 1966, Washington had to adapt its global

hegemony to a changing world. At a meeting in December 1954, the NSC tried to stake out a strategy that could somehow cope with this plethora of new nations. After a review of the “threats” facing the US in Latin America, Treasury Secretary George Humphrey informed his NSC colleagues that they should “stop talking so much about democracy” and instead “support dictatorships of the right if their policies are pro-American.” Interrupting him, President Eisenhower observed: “You mean they’re OK if they’re *our* s.o.b.’s.”²⁷ With his usual strategic insight, the president had encapsulated the system of global dominion that Washington would implement for the next forty years—setting aside democratic principles to back almost any reliably loyal leader, whether dictator or democrat.

In a major innovation brought on by the Cold War, covert operations became a fourth and final element of US global power. From its founding in 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency was a critical mechanism for resolving the contradiction that lay at the heart of Washington’s world system: How could the US exercise its global hegemony by intervening in independent nations without being seen as violating their inviolable sovereignty under the UN Charter? The answer was to do so covertly, using the CIA to invisibly transgress the sovereignty of countless nations. As the Iron Curtain came down across Europe, the CIA tried to create active anti-communist resistance groups in Eastern Europe, an effort soon checked by the ruthlessly efficient Soviet-bloc secret police. In marked contrast to that dismal failure, Agency operations in Western Europe seemed stunningly successful—denying the Communist Party victory in the 1948 Italian elections, while simultaneously splitting the socialists and communists in France to keep the left out of power.

If viewed purely from a geostrategic perspective, such covert operations scored short-term global gains for US foreign policy during the Cold War—keeping Central America within the US sphere of influence, destroying a socialist experiment in Chile, and inflicting a searing defeat on the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan. But by fighting the Cold War covertly through the CIA, the White House also weakened the constitutional authority of Congress until that legislature finally pushed back hard during the Iran-Contra controversy in the late 1980s, the last years of the Cold War. And by using the CIA to covertly mobilize the country’s creative classes to compete with the Soviet Union, the executive defied legislation barring the Agency

from any domestic activity, sparking a succession of scandals that would, in the 1970s, roil Washington.

MASS MOBILIZATION USA

With both Moscow and Washington espousing competing visions for humanity, the Cold War would become a struggle over ideas, with words serving as bullets. In striking contrast to Moscow's ability to readily marshal intellectuals and artists of all stripes, American ideals of individual freedom precluded state involvement in civic life. Even President Eisenhower complained that the country spent "only a small amount" compared to the Soviet Union's "\$2 billion a year on its propaganda," which included cultural tours, Radio Moscow, and a "socialist realist" art accessible to the masses. Lacking a centralized cultural apparatus and unable to build one without mocking the country's core values, Washington turned to the CIA to clandestinely mobilize intellectuals across a wide spectrum of American academic and creative life—an effort replete with front organizations, undercover cash, and a circulation of trusted operatives between government and the private sector. Since the late 1960s, Congress, scholars, and the press have probed specific areas of such activity without ever drawing those disparate inquiries together to plumb the profound depth of the CIA's penetration of American civil society.²⁸

When the Agency launched that cultural mobilization in the early 1950s, a tight coterie of its senior officers controlled the clandestine effort, including: Deputy Director of Operations Allen Dulles; the head of Office of Policy Coordination, Frank Wisner; the chief of the International Organizations Division, Thomas W. Braden; and his assistant for manipulation of American media, Cord Meyer. Together these men built what Frank Wisner called his "Mighty Wurlitzer"—a powerful media organ that would play any propaganda tune he wanted.²⁹

To maintain a facade of free expression, the CIA laundered its covert cash through the country's "big three" of philanthropic foundations. In that effort, one of the Agency's close collaborators was Paul Hoffman, who had served as Marshall Plan administrator, presiding over the diversion of a portion of its aid funds to the CIA, before becoming president of the biggest of the big three, the Ford Foundation. Another close collaborator was David

Rockefeller, whose family foundation funded Agency projects. Since John Foster Dulles, brother of CIA deputy director Allen Dulles, had chaired the Rockefeller Foundation's board of trustees from 1950 to 1952, the operation there went smoothly. The Carnegie Corporation had a similar overlap in key personnel, funding priorities, and working relations with CIA and the Defense Department. Those three were the apex of the 170 foundations, fictional and real, that the Agency used to distribute secret subsidies to its cultural assets.³⁰

Organizations like the Congress for Cultural Freedom revealed the contradictions inherent in trying to protect intellectual freedom by covert means. With a generous CIA subsidy, two minor American writers living in Europe organized the Congress in 1950 to mobilize influential intellectuals for the creation of nothing less than a “newborn Euro-American mind.” With the CIA lavishing tens of millions of dollars to fund its activities in thirty-five countries, the organization attracted respected thinkers like Arthur Koestler, Bertrand Russell, Benedetto Croce, and Reinhold Niebuhr. In England, the Congress funded *Encounter* magazine to try to keep British intellectuals from lapsing “into the heresy of neutralism,” and facilitated other journals such as *The Twentieth Century* (England), *Preuves* (France), *Perspectives* (Italy, France, Germany), and a dozen more from India to Latin America. “Whether they liked it or not, whether they knew it or not,” writes historian Frances Saunders, “there were few writers, poets, artists, historians, scientists, or critics in postwar Europe whose names were not in some way linked to this covert enterprise.”³¹

THE CIA AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

In such a multifaceted cultural Cold War, the CIA, unbelievably enough, may have left its most lasting imprint in the field of modern art. In contrast to Soviet socialist realism with its heroic workers etched with almost-photographic clarity, Washington and its cultural interlocutors promoted abstract art as a vehicle to carry the American artist to the frontiers of the human imagination in a quest for pure form. After attacks from right-wing congressmen forced the cancelation of a State Department exhibition of modern artists in 1947, advocates of abstract expressionism turned to Tom Braden and the CIA for support. Reflecting the Agency's preference for

indirect influence, Braden worked through Nelson Rockefeller, president of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), to advance modern art as a cultural weapon in the Cold War. As chief of the CIA's Soviet Division, Donald Jameson, explained: "We recognized that this was the kind of art that . . . made socialist realism look even more stylized and rigid and confined than it was."³²

Writing in the journal *Artforum*, critic Eva Cockcroft credited this invisible hand with the sudden rise of New York abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollack, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell. "Links between cultural cold war politics and the success of Abstract Expressionism are by no means coincidental," she wrote. "They were consciously forged at the time by some of the most influential figures controlling museum policies and advocating enlightened Cold War tactics designed to woo European intellectuals."³³

Starting in 1952, MoMA launched international touring exhibits of abstract expressionist art in alliance with the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom; by 1956, thirty-three shows had been exhibited at Europe's most prestigious galleries.³⁴ Apart from such arm's-length promotion, the Agency financed exhibitions directly, spending \$15,000 to stage an abstract show in Vienna to counter the 1959 Communist Youth Festival, and another \$20,000 to bring the same exhibit to Paris. Celebrating MoMA's role, President Eisenhower stated, with an ironic prescience: "When artists are made slaves . . . of the state; when artists become chief propagandists of a cause . . . creation and genius are destroyed."³⁵

Indeed, secret state patronage and the wealth that came with it proved fatal for New York's abstract expressionists, many of whom had started their careers in the 1930s as leftists, often communists, celebrating the purity of art. As their paintings got "bigger and bigger and emptier and emptier," those artists, observed Saunders, followed the "stylistic conformity prescribed by MoMA . . . to the verge of kitsch." Jackson Pollack died driving drunk. Arshile Gorky hanged himself. Franz Kline drank himself to death. Sculptor David Smith died in a car crash. One of the last to go, Mark Rothko, slashed his wrists and bled out on the floor of his studio.³⁶

CULTURAL COLD WAR

Since the Cold War was essentially a world war over ideas, the CIA also played an active role in influencing popular culture, whether newspapers, film production, or book publishing. Within this broad media spectrum, the press became the CIA's most important weapon for political warfare. "We had at least one newspaper in every foreign capital at any given time," said a CIA officer—including the *Bangkok World*, *Manila Times*, *Tokyo Evening News*, and *Rome Daily American*.³⁷

Of all the CIA's cultural interventions, the boldest was its manipulation of media coverage through assets in both the foreign and domestic press—a clear violation of legislation barring the Agency from operating inside the United States. According to reporter Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame, that operation recruited four hundred media assets during the 1950s, including Henry Luce of *Time* magazine, William Paley at CBS Television, and Arthur Hays Sulzberger of the *New York Times*. Not only did those media barons give the Agency access to their staff, but on occasion they shaped their coverage to meet the CIA's needs. In an informal fact-check of Bernstein's allegations, the *New York Times* found that the figure of four hundred American journalists came up short. Actually, closer to eight hundred had collaborated with the CIA.³⁸ While American journalists often gathered intelligence for the Agency overseas, its infiltration of domestic media also influenced news coverage inside the United States.

The master of this media manipulation was Cord Meyer, who ran the CIA's program of press controls from 1954 to 1962. Since the program's dubious legality exempted it from Agency oversight, and Meyer's elite social connections insulated him from any real supervision, he became nothing less than the CIA's man on the spot in America. Born into a wealthy New York family and educated at St. Paul's School and Yale University, Meyer served in the Marine Corps during World War II, fighting in the Pacific and writing about it movingly for *The Atlantic* magazine. After the war, in "the social event of the season," he married New York socialite Mary Pinchot, a great beauty who later became President John F. Kennedy's mistress. In 1945, Meyer served in the US delegation that wrote the UN charter, and then became president of the United World Federalists, crisscrossing the country to give speeches advocating a single global government that often ended with standing ovations. Listening to his plea for "a peace that will survive to the end of time," one writer described him

as “passionate and persuasive,” with a brilliant future that should lead him “to win the Nobel Prize.” Instead, Meyer was recruited by spymaster Allen Dulles to join the CIA in 1951 and was soon running its International Organizations Division, which “constituted the greatest single concentration of covert political and propaganda activities of the by now octopus-like CIA.”³⁹

If Frank Wisner had built the CIA’s “Mighty Wurlitzer,” then Cord Meyer played it like a virtuoso, exercising extraordinary influence over what reporter Carl Bernstein called “the most prominent sectors of the American press corps, including four or five of the largest newspapers in the country, the broadcast networks, and the two major newsweekly magazines.” As chief of the Agency’s covert-action staff from 1962 to 1967, he also controlled its \$3 million funding over that period for the National Student Association, which had branches on campuses across the country, using draft call-ups and security oaths to discipline the group’s unruly student officers.⁴⁰

For more than twenty years, Cord Meyer virtually vanished into the covert netherworld. But in the summer of 1972, while serving as the CIA’s assistant deputy director for covert operations, he finally surfaced by walking into the offices of Harper & Row publishers in New York City to meet the company’s president emeritus, Cass Canfield Sr., a “good friend” from their World Federalist days (who also had his own “prolific links to the world of intelligence”). The subject of their meeting was a book manuscript that, Meyer said, threatened national security. As it happened, the book in question was my own, *The Politics of Heroin*, which explored CIA ties to Southeast Asian drug lords, and was due out in just a few months. Cord Meyer asked Canfield that it be quietly suppressed.⁴¹

By the time he walked into that office, two decades of CIA service had changed Meyer from a liberal idealist into what one author called “a relentless, implacable advocate for his own ideas,” driven by “a paranoiac distrust of everyone who didn’t agree with him.”⁴² Although the publisher gave the page proofs of my book to the CIA for review, reporter Seymour Hersh exposed Meyer’s attempt at suppression in a front-page story for the *New York Times*, forcing him to desist.⁴³

Defeated in the public arena, Meyer retreated into the shadows and retaliated. Federal officials from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare turned up at Yale to investigate my graduate fellowship. The IRS

audited my poverty-level student income. FBI agents tapped my phone and compiled a dossier on my campus activities.⁴⁴ Half a world away in the remote mountains of Laos, a CIA helicopter landed in the opium-growing village where I had done my research and whisked the headman away for an intimidating interview.⁴⁵ Not only could the CIA reach into those distant highlands, but it had penetrated deep inside American society.

My career somehow survived the controversy, but Cord Meyer's apparently did not. Although he was well positioned to become the CIA's next chief of covert operations, the "public disclosure about the book deal," reported the *Washington Post*, "dampened his prospects," and he was soon shipped off to London and into retirement.⁴⁶ Apart from serving as a startling introduction to my professional career, this incident suggests that the CIA's media manipulation in the US involved not just the spreading of information and disinformation but suppressing views deemed dissident.

THE CIA AND HOLLYWOOD

Using the same subtle pressures that worked with the press, Washington deployed the country's film industry as a powerful propaganda instrument. As film critic Tricia Jenkins observed, Hollywood films could "communicate pro-democratic messages in countries where illiteracy rates were high." If *Encounter* and modern art were the CIA's way of influencing intellectuals, movies were its ticket to the masses.⁴⁷ The Agency's covert promotion of message movies, combined with the FBI's role in blacklisting suspected subversives in the film industry, made Hollywood an ad hoc adjunct in Washington's propaganda war.

The effort intensified in early 1953 when C. D. Jackson, the president's adviser on psychological warfare, decided that "the most effective use of American films is not to design an entire picture . . . , but to see to it that . . . the right line, aside, inflection, eyebrow movement is introduced." To implement this policy, Jackson turned to "friends" who headed Hollywood's major studios including Fox, MGM, Warner Brothers, RKO, Columbia, and Disney. His intermediary was the CIA's resident Hollywood officer, Carleton Alsop, who was charged with monitoring the industry's suspected subversives and introducing desired themes into film productions.⁴⁸

At first, the CIA tried to encourage films that promoted a positive image of America abroad in a bid to counter Soviet propaganda about racial segregation in the US. However, a top executive at Paramount Pictures, Luigi Luraschi, went a step further, using his position to edit out negative portrayals showing Americans as drunken or prejudiced, and also working to prevent industry recognition of “suspect” films. In March 1953, Luraschi wrote the CIA about two left-leaning films up for Oscar awards, saying: “Our Leftist friends are anxious to get *The Small World of Don Camillo* the award [for Best Foreign Picture]. They want to focus attention on a picture which in essence says Communism and the rest of the world *can* get on together. I think we have them stymied.” In the best film category, Luraschi was concerned that the Western gunfight film *High Noon*, as a metaphor for the dangers of Washington’s anti-communist witch hunt, would be popular in left-leaning Hollywood and claimed to have blocked it from winning. Instead, the Oscar went to *The Greatest Show on Earth*, a film since considered by many critics to be the worst ever to win the award for best picture.⁴⁹

Most famously, the CIA tampered with the 1958 film version of the Graham Greene novel *The Quiet American*, which was quite critical of early US involvement in Vietnam. After approving studio plans to give the story a pro-American spin, CIA director Dulles arranged permission for the company to shoot the film in Saigon. There, CIA operative Edward Lansdale, famous for making Ngo Dinh Diem president of South Vietnam, pressed director Joseph L. Mankiewicz to “reverse the anti-Americanism” of Greene’s work by showing the communists conducting a terrorist bombing, even though the actual attack had been done by one of his own anti-communist allies. Writing Diem following the film’s release, Lansdale said that they had changed “Greene’s novel of despair” in ways that should help him “win more friends . . . in many places in the world where it is shown.”⁵⁰

In the CIA’s most direct industry intervention, officer E. Howard Hunt of Watergate fame would serve as shadow producer in adapting George Orwell’s two best-known books, transforming them into shrill anti-communist propaganda. Just as the animated production of *Animal Farm* closed with an anti-communist uprising, so the film version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ends with the hero Winston, a dissident struggling against a dystopian dictatorship, no longer broken by torture to admit “he loved Big

Brother,” but instead dying in a blaze of gunfire as he shouts, “Down with Big Brother!” By the late 1950s, the Agency was also financing the distribution of movies in contested regions of the world, particularly Spanish-language films promoting the Catholic Church’s Rosary Crusade in Latin America. By then, however, the Eisenhower administration had begun to shift foreign propaganda to the United States Information Agency, sparing the CIA’s role in the film industry from being exposed during the media probes of the 1960s.⁵¹

Even the staid publishing industry was subject to CIA intervention. Through secret subsidies to authors or direct payments to publishers, the Agency funded the publication of books, including both forgettable propaganda and memorable anti-communist manifestos like *The New Class* by famed Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas. In hearings chaired by Senator Frank Church, a congressional investigation would find the CIA had “sponsored, subsidized, or produced” over a thousand books by 1967. Some of those would become best-sellers in the United States, such as *The Penkovsky Papers*, the memoirs of a Soviet colonel executed in 1963 for passing missile secrets to the West. By 1978, the CIA’s combined mass media propaganda campaign had an annual budget of \$265 million, slightly larger than that of all three news wire services combined.⁵²

THE FBI’S ANTI-COMMUNIST CRUSADE

While the CIA collected foreign intelligence, the FBI was responsible for domestic counter-intelligence, making the bureau’s long-serving director, J. Edgar Hoover, an enforcer of ideological conformity. Building upon a surveillance apparatus the bureau had built during an earlier period of political repression in the 1920s, this fusion of FBI and CIA activities during the Cold War represented a marked expansion of executive authority over American civil society. In a powerful right-left punch, the FBI’s attempt to ban subversives from working in Hollywood complemented the CIA’s promotion of pro-American film content.

In hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947, Hoover fired a sensational first shot in a war on silver-screen subversion. In heavily publicized hearings, Congressman Richard Nixon asked if there was “any one area in which the Communists are more .

. . more deeply entrenched than any other?” Yes, the FBI director replied, Congress should focus on “fields which mold public opinion and in which the Communists have been successful in effecting infiltration, such as the radio, the motion pictures.”⁵³

When HUAC reconvened in October 1947, ten screenwriters, led by Dalton Trumbo and Ring Lardner Jr., refused to name any communists in the Screen Writers Guild. Congress indicted them and the Motion Picture Association formally banned them, launching the first Hollywood “blacklist.” Three years later, several former FBI agents published *Red Channels*, a pamphlet that listed 151 supposed show-business subversives.⁵⁴

Even after the mass anti-communist movement faded by the late 1950s, the FBI persisted with its repression. In the first years of the Cold War, the bureau had hired 3,500 additional staff to investigate all federal employees for President Truman’s anti-communist Loyalty Review Board. Operating covertly against dissidents from 1956 to 1971, the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) used, said Hoover himself, “anonymous letters” and “more sophisticated techniques” to cause “unexpected consternation . . . among the comrades” and alert the public “to their insidious maneuvers.”⁵⁵ Looking back, William C. Sullivan, the assistant to the FBI director, would call this operation “a rough, tough, dirty business. . . . No holds were barred.” In assessing the 2,370 operations that COINTELPRO conducted during the program’s fifteen-year history, the Senate’s Church Committee found its “tough, dirty” methods included “anonymous attempts to . . . ostracize persons from their professions, and provoke target groups into rivalries that might result in deaths.”⁵⁶

From 1960 to 1974, the FBI also conducted over five hundred thousand separate investigations of “subversive” suspects. Yet, said the Senate’s Church Committee in 1975, “not a single individual or group has been prosecuted since 1957 [for] advocating action to overthrow the government.”⁵⁷ While the FBI’s massive counter-intelligence operation might not have produced arrests, it still succeeded in suppressing dissent and imposing both ideological and cultural conformity within American society.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

To hone language and culture into Cold War weapons, US national security agencies mobilized academics in diverse disciplines—not only the obvious hard sciences such as aeronautics and physics, but also the social sciences, particularly anthropology, psychology, and mass communications. Though the number of disciplines was limited, the national security reach within each was both deep and wide, making the federal government a major source of funding for the social sciences.

In a revealing parallel with the film industry, a combination of FBI sanctions and CIA incentives made the academy a critical component of Washington's Cold War mobilization. While FBI investigations produced few indictments, strategic leaks to conservative legislators generated information that led to damaging congressional charges against university scholars. In the wake of HUAC's probe for Soviet sympathizers among nuclear physicists in the late 1940s, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee also accused forty-three Asian experts affiliated with the Institute of Pacific Relations of aiding the communist conquest of China, starting a critique of the academy that culminated in a 1953 report on "Subversive Influence in the Academic Process." As state legislators sanctioned supposedly disloyal academics in California, Maryland, Michigan, New York, and Ohio, major universities formed what historian Ellen Schrecker later called "a blacklist at least as comprehensive and far less well known than the one in the entertainment industry." In 1953, the counsel to the California Subcommittee on Un-American Activities claimed that a hundred supposedly disloyal academics in the state had been fired and hundreds more had not been hired.⁵⁸

With such sanctions pressuring academics to cooperate, the CIA found willing scholarly collaborators in an ambitious effort to amass cultural knowledge and then apply it to the challenge of counterinsurgency. With \$4 million in funding from the armed forces and CIA during the 1950s, the Human Relations Area Files, based at Yale University, hired scholars to compile anthropological data on societies worldwide, which was synthesized into ninety-seven classified and unclassified country studies. Between 1956 and 1966, the US Army also funded the Special Operations Research Office (SORO) at American University, which paid ethnographers to publish about fifty major studies on topics like the implications of witchcraft for "military and paramilitary operations in the Congo." More broadly, by the mid-1960s the CIA, using "pass through" foundations, could

“manipulate about half the grants made in the USA for international research.”⁵⁹

After the Cuban revolution and the Vietnam conflict created a need for improved counterinsurgency, the Army launched “Project Camelot,” with \$6 million in funding routed through American University for social science research concentrated on Chile to develop “an advanced system of early warning of internal conflict.” During a field trip to the country’s capital, Santiago, University of Pittsburgh anthropologist Hugo Nutini tried to recruit local academics for Project Camelot. But revelations about the US military’s role sparked a storm of local controversy that forced the project’s cancelation. Nonetheless, Pentagon support for social science research continued, climbing from \$26 million in 1965, when Camelot had ended, to \$49 million five years later.⁶⁰

Under this research rubric, between 1961 and 1975 the Pentagon’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) awarded contracts for nearly five thousand academic studies of insurgency in an ambitious effort “to construct the equivalent of a chemical Table of the Elements for . . . ‘unconventional warfare.’” As the Vietnam War intensified in 1966–67, ARPA spent nearly \$4 million annually to produce studies like anthropologist Terry Rambo’s *U.S. Army Handbook of Counterinsurgency Guidelines for Area Commanders*. In sum, for nearly fifteen years, secret Defense Department funding mobilized hundreds, possibly thousands of scholars for contract research that, in the view of prominent sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz, “corrupted . . . the authority and profoundly limited the autonomy of the social scientists.”⁶¹

MIND CONTROL

Just as the CIA infiltrated major media outlets, so the Agency’s psychological warfare program inserted itself in academia, helping to create the discipline of mass communications while funding psychology research at leading universities in both the US and Canada. In 1951, suggesting the importance of this new domain of Cold War competition, the National Security Council formed a “Psychological Strategy Board,” which would coordinate government propaganda for two years until it was merged into a successor organization that supervised psywar activities until 1961.

Starting in 1947, the CIA also funded mass communications research at several universities, exploring ways to influence public opinion in diverse societies around the globe. Such academic fields became so integral to the global “war of ideas” that, by 1952, an estimated 96 percent of federal funding for the social sciences came from the military, helping develop mass communications into a new academic discipline.⁶²

Through similar methods, the CIA also mobilized leading centers of psychological research in both the US and Canada to develop a new doctrine of coercive interrogation. At the start of the Cold War in the late 1940s, communist states in Eastern Europe staged show trials that shocked the West with confessions by Protestant pastors and a prominent Catholic prelate, Cardinal József Mindszenty of Hungary, raising real fears that the Soviets had somehow cracked the code of human consciousness. Adding to those concerns, in 1952 and 1953 North Korean tortures forced captured US pilots, including a Marine Corps colonel, to broadcast damaging charges that the United States was engaging in germ warfare. In response, from 1950 to 1962 the Agency conducted a clandestine research project that the *New York Times* later described as a “secret, 25-year, \$25 million effort by the Central Intelligence Agency to learn how to control the human mind.”⁶³

In marked contrast to Soviet command-economy methods for mobilizing scientists, the CIA employed secret funding and collegial manipulation to steer the research agenda among cognitive science scholars. According to a CIA inspector general’s report compiled in 1957, the Agency “had added difficulty in obtaining expert services,” since some of the experiments it wanted done “are considered to be professionally unethical and in some instances border on the illegal.” Hence, as one member of the CIA’s Technical Services Division told the *New York Times*, “secrecy has been used to protect the researchers from peer group pressure should it be known that they were working for the Agency.”⁶⁴ Apart from a few lead scholars who were witting collaborators, most academic researchers were unaware of the secret agenda, including hundreds (possibly thousands) of professors, junior faculty, and graduate assistants. Through covert funding distributed via front organizations and secret collaborators, the CIA maneuvered the cognitive science community toward a collective research effort to develop a new method for psychological torture.

In retrospect, we can trace two main threads through this tangled decade of CIA research that led to a coherent doctrine of psychological torture.

First, under Projects Artichoke and MKUltra, the CIA conducted a largely in-house exploration of exotic techniques such as drugs, electroshock, and hypnosis. With a lavish budget, MKUltra funded 149 research projects and 33 sub-projects at leading hospitals and universities across the US, including Columbia, Harvard, and Yale. All those experiments failed. In a telling example of such failure, Dr. Henry K. Beecher of Harvard University spent a decade testing the hallucinogenic drug LSD on unwitting student subjects in an unsuccessful quest for a “truth serum” to aid interrogation. At secure facilities in West Germany, moreover, the army and CIA employed former Gestapo soldiers and Nazi doctors for research into exotic mind-control methods, which were also unsuccessful.⁶⁵

By contrast, conventional behavioral research, outsourced to leading universities, developed a distinctly American form of psychological torture. The behavioral approach was given an impetus in 1951 when Sir Henry T. Tizard, senior scientist at the British Ministry of Defence, met in Montreal with representatives of the CIA and Canada’s Defense Research Board to plan an allied effort to develop mind-control methods for the fight against the Soviet Union.⁶⁶

This behavioral research produced two discoveries foundational for the CIA’s emerging psychological paradigm—sensory deprivation and self-inflicted pain. In the most seminal innovation, Dr. Donald O. Hebb, a principal in that secret project, paid student volunteers at McGill University to simply sit in a comfortable cubicle for twenty-four to forty-eight hours deprived of sensory stimulation through the aid of goggles, gloves, and earmuffs. This seemingly benign procedure induced extreme hallucinations similar to the effect of mescaline and, among some subjects, a state akin to psychosis. After Hebb started releasing his results in 1954, over 230 articles would appear in peer-reviewed journals about sensory deprivation over the span of just four years, showing the extent of the CIA’s manipulation of the cognitive science community.⁶⁷

During the 1950s as well, two researchers at Cornell University Medical Center working for the CIA developed the second strand in the Agency’s psychological paradigm, self-inflicted pain. Their research found that the Soviet KGB’s most devastating torture technique involved not brutal beatings but simply forced extended standing. Compelled to remain immobile for days at time, the KGB’s victims found their legs swelled, their

skin erupted in suppurating lesions, and hallucinations began—a procedure now called “stress positions.”⁶⁸

In 1963, the CIA distilled this decade of secret mind-control research into its “KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation” manual, which emphasized those two foundational techniques: sensory deprivation and self-inflicted pain. During the Cold War, the CIA would disseminate this psychological torture paradigm among allied security services worldwide—notably, in South Vietnam, Brazil, Uruguay, Honduras, and Guatemala.⁶⁹ After the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the CIA would revive these two foundational techniques, which would be repeatedly used in the five years of interrogation that followed.

CURTAILING CULTURAL MOBILIZATION

After twenty years of enforced ideological consensus, rising dissent over the Vietnam War sparked a succession of media exposés that would curtail the CIA’s penetration of civil society. In April 1966, the *New York Times* published a series on the Agency’s foreign operations that revealed the CIA’s ties to MIT’s Center for International Studies, stating: “The agency helped to establish the center with a \$300,000 grant in 1951 and has since then supported much of its research, mostly in Communist affairs.” Illustrating the revolving door between Agency and academy, the center’s head, Professor Max Millikan, had been an assistant CIA director in 1951–52.⁷⁰ Another *Times* article offered a broad-brush sketch of the CIA’s domestic ties, adding that the Agency had long “supported” the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its journals. The storm of controversy that followed forced the editors of *Encounter* magazine to step down.⁷¹

The rising drumbeat of revelations continued in February 1967 when the New Left magazine *Ramparts* revealed the CIA’s secret funding of the National Student Association. Not only did the Agency pay the NSA \$1.8 million between 1962 and 1964, but it also rewarded cooperative student officers with stipends, scholarships, and draft deferments that spared them from fighting—and dying—in the Vietnam War. Just two months later, former CIA officer Tom Braden preempted any exposé of his covert career by publishing an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* detailing the Agency’s funding for the AFL-CIO’s international labor activities.⁷²

And the exposés just kept on coming. In 1974, Seymour Hersh of the *New York Times* reported that the CIA, despite a legislative ban on its domestic operations, had “conducted a massive, illegal domestic intelligence operation” that targeted American anti-war protesters with “break-ins, wiretapping, and the surreptitious inspection of mail.”⁷³ Within months, a White House investigation, headed by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, found that, from 1969 to 1974, the CIA’s Operation Chaos had conducted a massive domestic surveillance of anti-war dissidents with “a computer system containing an index of over 300,000 names and organizations.” In 1975, Senator Frank Church’s highly publicized investigations uncovered the CIA’s mind-control research under Operation MKUltra and the Agency’s assassinations of foreign leaders, as well as the domestic surveillance under the FBI’s COINTELPRO.⁷⁴

With the press no longer under its control, the CIA’s cultural empire soon came crashing down—with front organizations outed, the secret funding of academia exposed, proprietary newspapers sold, and the media wary of CIA contacts. Overall, said a former member of the Agency’s historical unit, this was “one of the worst operational catastrophes in CIA history.”⁷⁵ By the early 1970s, the CIA’s armory of cultural weapons had become a casualty of a generational shift in political values prompted by youthful protests over the Vietnam War.

More broadly, these events produced a significant check on state controls over American civil society that the executive had built, during the Cold War’s first decades, through the domestic surveillance of suspected dissidents. Just as the CIA could no longer covertly mobilize the country’s creative classes to wage the cultural Cold War, so the FBI’s capacity to suppress dissent through blacklisting and intimidation had largely ended. Yet the executive’s extra-constitutional authority over foreign policy would continue to expand through CIA operations, producing a long-running clash with Congress over covert action and culminating in a major political controversy during the late 1980s.

THE LEGACY OF THE CULTURAL COLD WAR

In the Cold War’s first two decades, the CIA’s media machine gave Washington a decided advantage in the competition for international

influence. Despite Radio Moscow's powerful signal, the combined influence of the Soviet Union's TASS news service and communist party newspapers like *L'Humanité* in Paris, the *Daily Worker* in London, and *l'Unità* in Rome was modest at best. By contrast, Frank Wisner's Mighty Wurlitzer was an agile apparatus, able to plant both information and disinformation worldwide in ways that assured maximum impact. But by the late 1960s, with the Cold War only half over, the CIA's once powerful propaganda machine had been silenced without a way to build an adequate replacement.^{[76](#)}



Thomas H. Karamessines, former chief of CIA covert operations, arrives to testify about alleged CIA domestic espionage, Washington, DC, February 24, 1975. (Credit: AP Photo / Henry Burroughs)

CHAPTER 3

EUROPE—COCKPIT OF CONFLICT

After fighting their way across Germany from the west and the east, American and Russian troops finally met up in April 1945 on the banks of the Elbe River for historic handshakes and vodka toasts that celebrated the impending defeat of the Nazi regime. A hundred miles farther north, however, nearly two million Russian troops were still battling their way into Berlin with artillery barrages that reduced the capital of Hitler's "Thousand Year Reich" to rubble, leaving two hundred thousand Germans dead. On May 8 at a suburban military base, the commanders of the surviving Nazi forces capitulated and signed an unconditional surrender, allowing the Allies to occupy Germany as they saw fit.

Just as Germany was ravaged by war, so was much of Europe devastated, destabilized, and now divided among four Allied occupying armies, producing tensions that would soon spark the start of the Cold War. Not only had World War II killed 40 million people of the continent's population of 550 million, but it also had damaged many of its largest cities, with, for instance, the Polish capital of Warsaw more than 80 percent destroyed.

By late 1945, much of Europe was starving. Even in the Netherlands, which had been spared the most destructive fighting, some twenty-two thousand people died during the "hunger winter" of 1945.¹ Despite UN efforts to deliver food supplies, severe shortages would persist through the bitterly cold winter of 1947. All across Europe, moreover, humanity was moving like a giant ant hill, with seventeen million people adrift in Germany alone. Elsewhere, postwar expulsions in central and eastern Europe displaced some twenty million more.²

There was still no fixed boundary between US and Soviet forces. Moreover, Moscow had sympathetic communist parties across Western Europe, creating the threat of communist expansion in Greece, Italy, and even France. Desperate for a solution to postwar chaos, many Europeans were embracing socialism, with local communist parties attracting 800,000 members in France and 1.8 million in Italy—a troubling development that Washington felt must be remedied by rapid economic reconstruction.³

Moreover, Germany's defeat had left a power vacuum at the heart of Europe, compounded by the weakness of neighboring nations like Austria and the Netherlands. After four hundred years of dominating the globe and carving much of it up into colonial empires, Europe itself was now being carved up by occupying powers. This sudden inversion of the global order made postwar Europe a veritable black hole of geopolitical instability, unleashing powerful political forces that pulled rival superpowers into serious conflict. By early 1946, an Iron Curtain was also descending across the continent, with massive military forces facing off in Central Europe.

Amid rising tensions, conventional conflict was fast becoming prohibitively dangerous, particularly after 1949 when the Soviet Union developed its own nuclear weapons. Instead of direct military confrontations with all their dangers, Moscow and Washington would find that they had little choice but to compete obliquely, using covert operations to control their respective European client states and to probe for weakness on the other side.⁴ Although Washington criticized Moscow's dominion over Eastern Europe, the threat of thermonuclear war would prevent the US from intervening in any tangible way, even when Hungary later erupted in a major anti-Soviet revolt.

THE SOVIET EMPIRE IN EASTERN EUROPE

By war's end in 1945, Moscow's massive Red Army, then the largest armed force on the continent, had occupied Eastern Europe and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had no intention of withdrawing. To pull that region's seven nations and their eighty-eight million people more tightly into his orbit, Stalin and his merciless security chief, Lavrentiy Beria, engaged in covert manipulations that, first, maneuvered local communist parties into power and, then, used secret police to increase that party's control over the host

society. For the next forty years, the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe would be held together by four layers of controls that ranged from the enticingly ideological to the crudely coercive.⁵

At its apex, each East European satellite country would have its own communist party, which would use ideological indoctrination to reinforce its control over the state bureaucracy, military, economic enterprises, and secret police. During the 1930s, Stalin had stockpiled communist exiles in suites at Moscow's Hotel Lux and could now install these dour "little Stalins" to head his client states—notably, Bolesław Bierut (Poland), Georgi Dimitrov (Bulgaria), Klement Gottwald (Czechoslovakia), Mátyás Rákosi (Hungary), and Walter Ulbricht (East Germany).⁶ In September 1947, to coordinate those satellite parties, Moscow replaced its prewar Communist International (or Comintern) with the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform). At its inaugural meeting, Stalinist ideologue Andrei Zhdanov announced that "American imperialism is endeavoring . . . to dictate . . . extortionate terms for any assistance rendered" and pressed hard for French and Italian "comrades" to resist aid from the US Marshall Plan.⁷

Providing the steel to stiffen Stalin's grip, the Red Army would control the security services in each of those communist states, a bond formalized by the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Not only did the intelligence operations of the Soviet NKVD (and its successor after 1954, the KGB) penetrate those satellites, it also created a subordinate secret police within each state such as the Stasi in East Germany and the Securitate in Romania. These nations also had Soviet-style command economies, with state industries and collectivized agriculture, coordinated with Moscow's through quasi-barter exchange directed, after 1949, by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon).⁸

After Stalin's death in 1953, the Kremlin, fearing a system held together by his aura of power might come apart, developed a more responsive rule, both in Russia and Eastern Europe.⁹ As Nikita Khrushchev emerged as the new Soviet leader, he began a moderate liberalization of the Soviet system—formalizing consultations with Eastern Europe by forming the Warsaw Pact in 1955, expanding Comecon for economic development, and supporting the rise of leaders more concerned about their people's needs.¹⁰



All of this de-Stalinization culminated at the Soviet Communist Party's 20th Congress in February 1956, where Khrushchev told hundreds of

delegates: “The grave characteristics of Stalin . . . transformed themselves during the last years into a grave abuse of power. . . . Whoever opposed him was doomed to . . . subsequent moral and physical annihilation.” After years of worshipping Stalin’s cult of personality, some delegates fainted from shock at such words. Poland’s leader, Bolesław Bierut, had a heart attack while reading a transcript of them.¹¹

During this transitional moment, the Soviet empire would face riots in East Berlin, workers’ revolts in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and even an armed uprising in Hungary. But this modified system soon developed a mix of force and flexibility that allowed Moscow to continue its dominion over Eastern Europe until the very end of the Cold War.

MANAGING THE EMPIRE

Among its seven satellite states in Eastern Europe, Moscow struggled hardest to subordinate the largest of them, Poland. In the closing months of World War II, as the Red Army drove across the country to capture Berlin, the Soviet secret police installed their local allies, the Polish Committee of National Liberation, as rulers of cities and towns. With most of Poland under Soviet occupation by January 1945, Moscow established a provisional government and called it the Republic of Poland.¹²

To placate President Franklin Roosevelt, Stalin agreed, at the February 1945 Yalta summit, to issue a “Declaration on Liberated Europe,” promising everyone the right “to create democratic institutions of their own choice.” Right after the Yalta summit, the Soviet foreign secretary Vyacheslav Molotov remarked: “Poland! What a big deal. We are unaware of how the governments in Belgium, France, Germany, etc. are organized. No one consulted us. . . . We didn’t interfere because this is the zone of operations of British and American troops!”¹³

By May 1945, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was already concerned by the Soviet moves in Poland, writing President Harry Truman with a phrase that would become part of Cold War lore. “An iron curtain is drawn down on the [Soviet] front,” Churchill wrote. “There seems little doubt that the whole of the regions east . . . will soon be completely in their hands . . . as this enormous Muscovite advance into the centre of Europe takes place.”¹⁴

Meeting with the Allies at Potsdam near Berlin in July, Stalin wanted his Western partners to accept his dominance over Eastern Europe and, to that end, offered concessions by agreeing to divide a defeated Germany into four Allied zones of occupation—American, British, French, and Russian. Although the Western Allies accepted Moscow's position in Poland, Truman told Foreign Minister Molotov that he still expected free elections, later saying: "I gave it to him straight. I let him have it. It was the straight one-two to the jaw."¹⁵

To make Poland more malleable, Stalin annexed the eastern half of the country for the Soviet Union and expelled the Poles living there; next, he added a slice of eastern Germany to Poland and moved in a million Poles; and, finally, he expelled eight million Germans from all over Poland. After relaxing the repression following Stalin's death in 1953, the communist rulers of this truncated Polish state faced a serious crisis when thirty thousand workers rioted, marching through the city of Poznan demanding bread and freedom. Fearing unrest and facing the threat of Soviet intervention, the Polish Communist Party released a reformer, Władysław Gomułka, from prison and made him its first secretary.¹⁶

During his fifteen years in power, however, Gomułka grew increasingly insensitive to workers' needs. When strikes erupted at the Gdańsk shipyards in 1970, he ordered troops to open fire on the workers—starting a tense standoff between the communist state and its citizens that would continue for another twenty years.¹⁷ In sum, through the relentless manipulation of Poland's communist party, Moscow transformed that fiercely independent nation into a largely compliant communist ally.

Compared to the challenges it faced in Poland, Moscow at first found it easier to control Hungary through the outright military occupation of a nation that had been a wartime ally of Nazi Germany. Once the Red Army captured Budapest in early 1945, a former Comintern official, Mátyás Rákosi, became leader of a revived Hungarian Communist Party that imposed a Stalin-like cult of personality on the state. After Khrushchev's famous "secret speech" denouncing Stalin in 1956, however, exposés of Rákosi's many crimes forced him to flee to Moscow, precipitating an armed uprising.¹⁸

While the Soviet system could readily contain rioting in Poland and East Germany, the eruption of nationalist passions in Hungary strained the Soviet imperium. On the afternoon of October 23, 1956, the head of the

Hungarian Writers' Union joined twenty thousand student demonstrators in issuing a call for Hungary to be free from foreign domination. After that emotional rally, students marched on Magyar Radio to demand it broadcast their manifesto, sparking an armed revolt that soon spread across the country.¹⁹

With the NATO powers distracted by the British efforts to seize Egypt's Suez Canal, Khrushchev dispatched fifteen Red Army divisions to Budapest. By the time the five days of fighting ended, 2,700 Hungarian fighters had been killed and about 20,000 wounded, while the Red Army suffered 700 dead and 1,450 injured.²⁰ Once order was restored, the Soviets installed a reliable apparatchik, János Kádár, who would remain in power for the next twenty-two years, keeping Budapest closely aligned with Moscow.²¹

The close juxtaposition of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the Soviet invasion of Hungary sparked a raft of resignations from the French and Italian communist parties that made their electoral success increasingly unlikely. Unwilling to risk any escalation toward nuclear war with Moscow, the reaction from London and Washington was more muted, indicating that the West tacitly accepted Soviet dominion over Eastern Europe, despite all the rhetoric about freedom. No CIA aid was sent to the Hungarian rebels, forcing William Colby, the Agency's future director, to conclude: "It was established, once and for all, that the United States, while firmly committed to the containment of the Soviets . . . was not going to attempt to liberate any of the areas within that sphere."²²

In marked contrast to the unchecked installation of client states in Poland and Hungary, the Soviet subjugation of Czechoslovakia required a violent communist coup. In the first postwar elections of May 1946, the Czech Communist Party won 38 percent of the vote and its leader, Klement Gottwald, became prime minister.²³ After the liberal president, Edvard Beneš, decided to accept Marshall Plan aid from the United States, he was summoned to Moscow for a dressing down. Within months, the communists staged a crude coup that left a lone non-Communist in the cabinet, foreign minister Jan Masaryk, who would soon be thrown to his death from a window, most likely by an NKVD operative.²⁴

Two months later, the Czech Parliament approved a new constitution creating a people's democratic republic that would keep the communist party in power for decades to come. However, in the spring of 1953 protests

erupted in a dozen cities, while some twenty thousand people, largely workers at the massive Skoda munitions factory, seized control in the city of Plzeň (Pilsen), demanding free elections. But the regime jailed thousands of them and enforced its dour, repressive rule for another fifteen years until protests again erupted in the Prague Spring of 1968.^{[25](#)}

OCCUPIED GERMANY

More than anywhere else in Eastern Europe, East Germany felt the full force of Soviet power. In the four-power division of Germany that followed World War II, the Red Army occupied the eastern third of the country as well as a Soviet sector in East Berlin. In its zone, the Soviets were deeply unpopular, as Red Army troops dismantled factories for war reparations, subjected the population to countless privations, and transferred nearly half their zone's territory to communist Poland. After months of Soviet "rape and plunder," Stalin repatriated exiled German communists, who formed a Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the spring of 1946 as foundation for an incipient communist state.^{[26](#)}

By contrast, the commander of the American zone, General Lucius Clay, moved quickly to revive the ravaged economy and, in May 1946, barred any further Russian reparations removals from his zone. In February 1948, the Americans, British, and French merged their zones into a unified West Germany and sparked sustained economic growth by introducing a new Deutschmark currency pegged to the US dollar. In tandem with the start of the Marshall Plan's aid a few months later, these policies sparked a decade of rapid growth that tripled West Germany's industrial production.^{[27](#)}

Reacting to these Allied moves, Stalin decided to consolidate control over his eastern zone by occupying all of Berlin. On June 24, 1948, just a week after the launch of the new Deutschmark, the 1.5 million Soviet occupation troops closed highways running through the Russian sector, cutting West Berlin off from its sources of food and fuel.^{[28](#)} For the next twelve months, American and British transport aircraft made a total of 250,000 flights to keep the city supplied with 13,000 tons of daily essentials.^{[29](#)} After ending the blockade in May 1949, Moscow transformed its eastern zone into a sovereign state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR).^{[30](#)}

Seeing the GDR's formation as a green light for socialist transformation, the general secretary of the East German communist party, Walter Ulbricht, pushed an accelerated program of collectivization—resulting in a collapse of workers' wages, the flight of 40 percent of the wealthier farmers to the West, and escalating electricity failures. After local communists published a humiliating retraction of their socialist program at Moscow's insistence, East Berlin's workers went on strike, sparking nationwide protests by five hundred thousand people in over 560 towns and cities. With surprising speed, twenty thousand Soviet troops, backed by 350 tanks, quashed the protests, while the Stasi secret police took ten thousand people into custody and executed some forty protest leaders—crushing the demonstrations.³¹

As the Soviets were consolidating their control over the East, the US convened diplomatic conferences that agreed to West Germany's rearmament and admission into NATO in May 1955, gaining thereby a powerful military ally that could sustain the tenuous balance of power in central Europe.³² Meanwhile, East Germany stabilized by moderating work demands and expanding the Stasi secret police to prevent further protests. By 1989, the Stasi would have 102,000 operatives and 500,000 informants—meaning that 7 percent of East Germany's adult population was serving the secret police.³³ This blanket repression did succeed in suffocating further protest, but by 1961 nearly three million people, one-sixth of the GDR's population, had quietly fled to West Germany. To stanch the hemorrhaging of skilled labor, East Germany, with Moscow's backing, built a massive wall across the heart of Berlin that soon became the most iconic symbol of Soviet repression.³⁴

Among all the East European socialist parties, those of Yugoslavia and Albania were the only ones to win power on their own. In 1946, the wartime leader of the anti-Nazi resistance, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, formed the socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and started to show a certain independence from Moscow. Reacting with a murderous rage, Stalin expelled Yugoslavia from the Cominform and ordered a purge of "Titoist" traitors, jailing and executing a number of prominent party leaders across Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, Yugoslavia survived to become an anomaly in the context of the Cold War—an independent socialist state in the heart of Europe.³⁵

While the Soviets ran their sphere in Eastern Europe with a forceful mix of military power and police control, Moscow was more cautious in

Western Europe where it worked through large, influential communist parties to present the US with a serious strategic challenge—particularly in Greece, Italy, and France.

US INTERVENTION IN WESTERN EUROPE

As its World War II alliance with the Soviet Union crumbled, Washington's response was shaped by its Moscow-based diplomat George F. Kennan, who in February 1946 drew upon his Russian expertise to send the State Department what became known as the "long telegram," which was a condemnation of the "Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs." Then, writing under the pseudonym "Mr. X" in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, Kennan articulated what became the American Cold War strategy of "containment," which aimed "to promote . . . either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power."³⁶ The article generated ferocious criticism, most notably from famed commentator Walter Lippmann, whose 1947 book, prophetically titled *The Cold War*, condemned Kennan's containment strategy as "a strategic monstrosity" that could "be implemented only by recruiting, subsidizing, and supporting a heterogeneous array of satellites, clients, dependents, and puppets."³⁷ After much debate, the Truman administration nonetheless adopted Kennan's strategy of containing the Soviets behind the Iron Curtain while responding forcefully to any communist attempts at expansion—whether in Berlin, Greece, Italy, or France.

In 1948, to implement that policy, Washington launched the Marshall Plan as a \$13 billion aid program that aimed to rebuild Europe's economy while spreading democracy and open markets. Instead of simply stimulating growth, Washington hoped the plan's promotion of industrial efficiency would free Europe from economic conflict and "transcend earlier class divisions" that had fostered both fascism and communism—in effect, a political agenda hostile to leftist labor unions. Simultaneously and secretly, its American administrators skimmed about 5 percent of the required European counterpart funds, generating about \$685 million for CIA covert operations, largely in Europe.³⁸

In the first years of the Cold War, Washington's chief geopolitical challenge was keeping the Soviet Navy bottled up inside the Black Sea and

far from the Suez Canal, Europe's lifeline to the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Consequently, two of the earliest Cold War crises occurred among Mediterranean nations: the Greek civil war in 1946 (Washington's initial attempt at counterinsurgency); and Italy's 1948 elections (the CIA's first major effort in electoral manipulation). Meanwhile, with Iberia under fascist rule and Germany both divided and disarmed, France had become the most powerful nation in Western Europe and, like Italy and Greece, had a large communist party that posed a serious challenge to US control.

To secure Western Europe, Washington used Marshall Plan aid and the NATO military alliance to promote Europe's political integration, culminating in the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957.³⁹ To check local communist parties, the CIA formed national intelligence services in France, Italy, and Greece, which often had an ideological affinity for the ultra-right's neofascists. Moreover, Frank Wisner, the first director of the CIA's covert-action unit, the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), ordered the formation of "stay behind" networks meant to engage in "sabotage, countersabotage, and demolition" should the Soviets occupy any country in Western Europe. In collaboration with NATO's highly classified Operation Gladio, the CIA organized arms caches for those secret stay-behind militia—with as few as a hundred men in Belgium and as many as two thousand in Italy. Every few months, recalled Thomas Polgar, CIA station chief at Bonn in the early 1970s, NATO's Allied Coordinating Committee, which acted as an "unconventional-warfare planning group," hosted meetings of national intelligence services to "discuss having compatible communications equipment, I.D. procedures, food and, if the Russians advance, [ways] to take people across borders."⁴⁰ Although these networks were never used, they would facilitate successful military coups in Greece and France as well as several abortive attempts in Italy.

THE GREEK CIVIL WAR

More than any other event, US intervention in the Greek civil war marked Washington's entry into the wider Cold War. With communist regimes in Albania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria occupying the rest of the Balkan

peninsula, Greece was the only barrier to block Soviet influence from reaching the Mediterranean.

At the broadest level, the Greek civil war arose from the postwar eclipse of the British Empire, which had long controlled the country as an informal colony to protect approaches to the Suez Canal, then British-owned. Playing upon that alliance, Greek nationalists had doubled the size of their country's territory in the century after winning independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830, making such expansion a central tenet of their ideology. But during the 1920s and 1930s, they paid scant attention to economic growth, condemning most of their six million people to grinding rural poverty. Alarmed at the rising popularity of the communists during the Depression, Greece's King George II appointed General Ioannis Metaxas premier in 1936 and supported his propagation of a fascist "Third Hellenic Civilization."⁴¹

When the Nazis invaded and occupied Greece at the start of World War II, the British provided extensive aid to a growing guerrilla resistance. By 1943, the communist People's Liberation Army (ELAS) could field fifty thousand fighters, while the country's fascists were collaborating with the Nazis by forming Security Battalions.⁴² After the Germans withdrew in late 1944, Prime Minister Churchill dispatched his troops to occupy Athens and restore the royalist government, while accusing the leftist ELAS of plotting to "make Greece a Communist State with the totalitarian liquidation of all opponents." Adding geopolitical import to this escalating conflict, in August 1946 Moscow demanded joint control over the Turkish Straits linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, prompting Washington to dispatch the Sixth Fleet for maneuvers that forced the Soviets to back down.⁴³

GREEK CIVIL WAR, 1948-49



Starting in 1946, the Greek government, with British support, rounded up thousands of left-wing ELAS war veterans and sent them to an enforced exile on barren prison islands. However, several thousand of them fled to the neighboring socialist state of Yugoslavia, the first sign of the critical role its leader Marshal Tito would play in the Greek civil war. In response to the repression, the communist-led ELAS formed the Greek Democratic Army (GDA) and, in July, launched an armed struggle with weapons supplied by communist regimes in Albania and Yugoslavia. By early 1947, the GDA had more than fourteen thousand guerrillas and civil war was raging across much of Greece. As the Greek Army's commander, General Alexandros Papagos, noted: "At the end of 1946, the national forces were in danger of losing the war without fighting it."⁴⁴

WASHINGTON'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS IN GREECE

Teetering on the edge of fiscal collapse from its wartime debts, London advised Washington in February 1947 that it could no longer provide military aid to Greece, effectively ending its century of informal imperial dominion. From Athens, the US ambassador warned that without aid "the Greek government would disappear within a matter of weeks."⁴⁵

Washington went into crisis mode. Speaking before a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, President Harry Truman stated: "The disappearance of Greece as an independent state . . . would be disastrous not only for them but for the world." In addition to asking Congress for \$400 million to aid Greece and Turkey, in his speech he proclaimed the Truman Doctrine, functionally a declaration of Cold War against the Soviet Union. Behind closed doors, Secretary of State Dean Acheson told congressmen that Greece was like a rotten apple in a barrel that, if unchecked, "would infect Iran and all the East."⁴⁶

Just three months after Truman's speech, the Greek Communist Party's long-serving secretary-general, Nikos Zachariadis, met Stalin to plead for weapons to build a fifty-thousand-strong GDA that could establish a "Free Greece" in the country's north. Demonstrating his cautious and often conflicted strategy in the Balkans, the Soviet leader did not object but only provided the most limited of assistance.⁴⁷

By October 1947, the American military mission realized that aid alone could not defeat the GDA guerrillas and recommended the dispatch of a US Military Advisory and Planning Group for “energizing operational action.” To that end, the Pentagon increased its advisers from 14 to 190 and, in February 1948, gave General James Van Fleet both the authority and autonomy to become Washington’s man on the spot in Athens.⁴⁸ After growing up poor in Florida, Van Fleet entered the US Military Academy at West Point, where he was a star halfback on an undefeated football team and graduated in the famed class of 1915 with Omar Bradley and Dwight Eisenhower. Through combat in World War I and commands in World War II, Van Fleet became, in the words of his wartime chief of staff, “the most aggressive and hard-driving Army Corps Commander.” Although empowered by massive US military aid for Greece, Van Fleet also charmed the queen, kissed the ring of the Orthodox archbishop, and deferred to the authority of Greek commanders. Given the frustrations of his later command in the Korean War, Greece would become the singular shining success in his long military career.⁴⁹

Although he later described himself as a “dictator, a military dictator in every meaning of the word,” Van Fleet was in fact an effective diplomat, taking every plan to the king and prime minister for their approval, usually saying: “Here is a wonderful plan that has been worked out by your staff with my staff’s concurrence. We ask that you approve it and we’ll execute it together.” With his full complement of 430 US military advisers and his uncommon combination of aggressiveness and humility, Van Fleet led the Greek Army from defeat to victory in just eighteen months.⁵⁰ As US military supplies and advisers flooded into the country, its army grew from 90,000 ragtag troops in 1946 to a force of 250,000 well-armed, well-trained soldiers by the end of 1948.⁵¹

During the three years of civil war, the communist commander General Markos Vafiadis, a skilled tactician, employed a strategy that grew increasingly problematic as it shifted from guerrilla warfare to conventional combat. Yet even in the war’s final year, the situation still hung in the balance. In January 1949, the CIA reported that guerrillas “continue to possess the advantages of terrain, mobility, short supply lines, escape routes, and refuge areas.”⁵² However, once Moscow’s Cominform expelled Yugoslavia, Tito requested US aid and, in early 1949, Washington agreed but cautioned him that it “would not continue if he persisted in supporting

the Greek insurrection”—prompting Tito to deny the Greek guerrillas sanctuary. Such international pressures split the Greek party as its Stalinist leadership purged General Vafiadis along with his pro-Tito officers, and then ordered a complete shift from agile attacks to large-scale positional warfare that only served to set up the guerrillas for slaughter.⁵³

During a long winter lull in early 1949, Van Fleet launched an intensive training program for the Greek Army, starting with marksmanship and culminating in live-fire advances under rolling artillery barrages. In August, with Van Fleet on the front lines issuing orders, the Greek Army deployed fifty thousand soldiers in the rugged northwest mountains; applying their training, they advanced under artillery barrages, inflicting heavy casualties. By the end of those battles, the communist strength had fallen from 24,000 guerrillas to just 3,600 fighters in scattered bands. In October, the communist party announced its decision to “discontinue the armed struggle for the time being”—effectively ending the civil war.⁵⁴

By then, Greek society had paid a heavy price. Although estimates vary, 108,000 Greeks were killed, 50,000 condemned to exile, and some 750,000 rendered homeless. With the Communist Party now crushed, the country’s politics moved hard right—a shift reinforced by US military aid, the NATO alliance, and, above all, covert CIA ties to local neofascists.⁵⁵

CIA COVERT OPERATIONS

Throughout the civil war, conventional military operations gained a clandestine dimension through the CIA’s Thomas Karamessines, a Greek American who spent a decade immersed in Greece’s covert netherworld, becoming Washington’s man on the spot in Athens. Born in New York City in 1917, he graduated from Columbia Law School in 1940 and worked as a deputy district attorney with crime fighter Thomas Dewey before starting an intelligence career—first as an Office of Strategic Services employee with the Greek exile government in Cairo, next at the American embassy in Athens in 1945, and sometime around 1947, with the CIA in Greece, serving as station chief there from 1951 to 1953. Through his immersion in a covert netherworld of fascist secret societies, Karamessines gained a command of the clandestine arts that would carry him from Athens, where his protégés later plotted a coup, to Rome in 1959, where his covert allies

also attempted a coup, and finally to Washington where, as the head of CIA covert operations, he orchestrated the murderous Chilean coup of 1973.⁵⁶

By forming Greece's KYP intelligence service in 1953 and funding the neofascist Holy Bond of Greek Officers, whose members would later lead the junta that seized power in 1967, Karamessines fostered a lasting CIA alliance with the Greek right. Among the "hundreds of KYP agents" who went to America for CIA training was the junta's future leader, Colonel Georgios Papadopoulos, who, the *New York Times* reported, had "received money from [the] agency since 1952," a date that coincided with Karamessines's term as station chief. Overall, the CIA had what British intelligence officer C. M. Woodhouse called "a relation of great intimacy the KYP," which "excluded the official U.S. Embassy."⁵⁷

THE COLONELS' COUP

During the 1960s, rising partisan tensions created conditions for a coup. After a charismatic conservative, Konstantinos Karamanlis, lost office in the 1963 elections over his attempt to reduce the military's power, the liberal Georgios Papandreou governed with his Center Union Party from 1963 to 1965, introducing social reforms such as farmer's pensions and increased wages. As the rightist opposition mounted, the king worked through CIA station chief John M. Maury who, said one US official, tried to "buy Center Union Deputies so that the George Papandreou government was toppled." Despite his dismissal, Papandreou retained sufficient popular support to make him the likely winner in the coming May 1967 elections.⁵⁸

But at 2:00 a.m. on April 21, 1967, Colonel Georgios Papadopoulos led a coterie of colonels in a lightning coup that stationed tanks at strategic points in Athens and, with the help of police and Greece's KYP intelligence, rounded up ten thousand targeted civilians. As a "great believer in Hitler's 'new order,'" reported the London *Observer*, Colonel Papadopoulos himself had "served as captain in the Security Battalions trained by Nazis to hold down the British-armed partisans during the war." From 1959 to 1964, he had served as liaison between KYP intelligence and the CIA, and then spent three years forming the Union of Young Greek Officers (EENA) as a secret group of coup plotters. Their coup plan, the *Observer* reported, was based on NATO's contingency planning, in each

European country, for stay-behind resistance in the event of a communist seizure of power.⁵⁹

By closing Parliament, abolishing the monarchy, and spurning the European Community, the junta invested itself with the authority to trample human rights in pursuit of the nation's destiny as a "Hellenic-Christian society." To achieve the fascist ideal of a "corporatist" nation, the regime used its ESA military police for a repression campaign that included mass arrests, enforced exile, and systemic torture.⁶⁰

The US soon became a critical source of support. After the closure of its massive air base in Libya in 1969–70, Washington was reliant on a dozen major bases in Greece and helped perpetuate the military dictatorship. One US major general called the junta "the best damn government since Pericles." James M. Potts, the CIA's chief of station at Athens from 1968 to 1972, was, the *New York Times* reported, "on close terms throughout his stay there with Mr. Papadopoulos."⁶¹

Though rigorously repressive and strongly supported by the US, the Greek junta eventually collapsed. When Colonel Papadopoulos tried to renew popular support by becoming president in 1973, students at Athens Polytechnic University protested, prompting the regime to send in tanks and troops, killing at least fifty of them and wounding a thousand more. Just eight days later, General Dimitrios Ioannidis, a longtime CIA asset and chief of the ESA military police responsible for the torture program, ousted the junta's other leaders and re-imposed martial law.⁶²

Continuing the right-wing's relentless quest for territory, General Ioannidis maneuvered to seize Cyprus in the name of *enosis*, or unification with Greece. With the general's encouragement, in July 1974 the Cypriot National Guard ousted the island's president, Archbishop Makarios, whom US president Richard Nixon disdained as a "Mediterranean Castro," and replaced him with a pro-*enosis* regime. Five days later, however, the Turkish military invaded and seized the northern third of the island. With the threat of war looming, the Greek junta collapsed within three days, bringing senior statesman Karamanlis back from exile in Paris. His government arrested the generals, restored parliamentary democracy, and ended the hard-right policies that had polarized the country since the 1930s.⁶³

Amid the country's transition to democracy in 1975, an unexpected event shook the Greek government's once-close relationship with the

United States. Two days before Christmas, the CIA chief of station, Richard Welch, was driving home to the Agency's villa when three hooded assassins, members of the leftist November 17 Group, shot him fatally before speeding off in a stolen Simca sedan. As the American consul in Athens put it: "The CIA station chief was in bed with the guys who were beating up the Greeks. The agency was too close to the wrong people." Further loosening Washington's embrace, in 1981 President Karamanlis led Greece into the European Economic Union, formally ending its status as a US client state and opening the door for other Mediterranean allies, Spain and Portugal, to make a similar move.⁶⁴

Looking back, the US victory in the Greek civil war skewed the country's politics to the right for a generation, condemning it to nearly a decade of dictatorship. By building up an autonomous military more powerful than the state it served and a secret service filled with neofascist officers, American aid facilitated the junta's seizure of power in 1967. Moreover, the close US alliance with the Greek junta revealed Washington's preference, during the Cold War, for military dictators, making authoritarian rule the norm on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Ignoring the long-term costs, American policymakers felt their victory in the Greek civil war showed the efficacy of their version of "nation building," leading to its application elsewhere—successfully in South Korea and disastrously in South Vietnam.

INTERVENTION IN ITALY

While the US defeated the Greek guerrillas in just three years, its struggle against Italy's large communist party persisted for nearly three decades. At the close of World War II in Italy, Washington adopted extraordinary measures to secure this strategic nation, ravaged by the war and now roiled by the threat of a communist takeover. As the Allied advance liberated much of the country in 1943, driving Benito Mussolini's fascist government into Italy's north, communist-led guerrillas were liberating towns across the country and so would emerge from the war with a much-expanded political following. At the other end of the political spectrum, Mussolini's twenty-year rule from 1922 to 1943 had inserted fascism into every facet of Italian

society, leaving ample cadre for both future neofascist plots and CIA operations.

After the first free elections in a quarter of a century abolished the monarchy and formed a legislature in June 1946, the promulgation of a new constitution established Italy as a republic. With the Christian Democrats, communists, and socialists comprising an anti-fascist bloc in the new assembly, the three parties formed a coalition government under the moderate Alcide De Gasperi. In response to sustained US pressure, however, in May 1947 De Gasperi expelled the communists and socialists from his cabinet, prompting the communist leader Palmiro Togliatti to threaten an armed uprising by thirty thousand former resistance fighters.⁶⁵

In the critical campaign for Italy's parliament in 1948, the Communist Party (PCI) was running strongly, with a membership that had swelled to 2.5 million. To prevent them from threatening the US position in the Mediterranean "imminently and gravely," President Truman authorized the use of "unvouchered funds" and the CIA distributed \$10 million to aid the campaign of the conservative Christian Democrats.⁶⁶

When the ballots were counted in April 1948, the Christian Democrats, led by De Gasperi, had won a crushing 48 percent of the vote; the communist PCI, 31 percent; and the Socialists, just 7 percent. Not only did the outcome produce a clear conservative victory, but it also engendered a certain mutual respect that led Christian Democrats to view the communist PCI as "a legitimate enemy to be defeated rather than eliminated as the United States would have wished."⁶⁷ Nonetheless, Washington saw this outcome as such a triumph that the National Security Council expanded the CIA's formal mission to include, in June 1948, "propaganda, economic warfare, preventive direct action . . . and support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world."⁶⁸

To consolidate conservative control in the election's aftermath, the CIA funded the European agents for the anti-communist American Federation of Labor, Jay Lovestone and Irving Brown, who worked through local allies to split Italy's leftist labor federation by forming the Free National Federation of Labor, which grew, over the next two years, into a Catholic-led confederation. A year after the labor split, the CIA's James Jesus Angleton helped form SIFAR (Servizio di Informazioni delle Forze Armate) as Italy's intelligence service to assist the CIA in fighting communists.⁶⁹ With the

Christian Democrats in power, Italy became a founding member of NATO in April 1949 and soon made Naples the alliance's naval headquarters.

Despite such success, the PCI continued to grow, prompting Washington to redouble its efforts. In the 1951 local elections, the Christian Democrats took control of many cities, but the communists' share of the vote increased from 33 to 38 percent. Back in Washington, the Psychological Strategy Board reported in June 1951 that economic growth had "reduced the communists to minor proportions" everywhere in Europe except France and Italy—which made them "unreliable to the point of being a positive danger to our strategic plans for Europe in the event of war."⁷⁰

While their strong support for the Christian Democrats was failing to elicit the aggressive anti-communism Washington wanted, multiple US agencies were forming sub-rosa ties to right-wing elements in Italy.⁷¹ Working in tandem with NATO's Operation Gladio, the CIA formed a stay-behind network with a secret membership and hidden arms caches, each of which contained, according to Franklin Lindsay, the CIA officer who launched the program, "maybe a few hundred pounds of explosives to attack a very important target such as a railway bridge."⁷² NATO's Gladio network, along with the CIA's clandestine contacts with the far right, helped remake postwar Italy into a "dual state." The volatile electoral arena was paired with a more stable substrate of covert alliances, mediated by the Gladio "stay behind" network comprising industrial leaders, former fascists, mafia bosses, and intelligence officers.

At the start of the Cold War, that secret substrate was run by General Giovanni Carlo Re, the first director of Italy's SIFAR intelligence service, who made the Gladio apparatus into a contingency force for a possible coup should the communists take power. When communist votes kept rising with each election, the CIA found a more aggressive Gladio chief in General Giovanni De Lorenzo, described as a "brilliant and ruthless officer." After heading SIFAR intelligence from 1955 to 1962, he commanded the Carabinieri police, using these posts to build the Gladio training center on Sardinia, compile dossiers on 157,000 influential Italians, and, in 1964, plot an abortive coup. While serving as CIA station chief in Rome from 1959 to 1963, Thomas Karamessines cultivated neofascist allies, much as he had done in Greece, and worked through General De Lorenzo for access to detailed SIFAR dossiers loaded with "compromising details" to prevent Christian Democrat dalliances with socialists or communists.⁷³ A

succeeding CIA station chief, Mark Wyatt, recalled attending a training camp for Gladio's "stay behind" troops in Sardinia, but was concerned that if Italians with "adventurous ideas . . . became aware that there were large numbers of arms buried all over Italy, it could have led to a coup d'état."⁷⁴

Floating above this stable clandestine substrate were a succession of rotating electoral coalitions between the Christian Democrats and minority parties, particularly the Socialists. Although Italy had forty-eight governments with twenty-five prime ministers from 1945 to 1991, the anti-communist Christian Democrats remained in power for all but six years by endlessly shuffling the parliamentary deck. To compensate for the loss of votes to the communists in the industrial north, the Mafia delivered a winning margin of votes from Sicily, usually about 13 percent of the national electorate, to the Christian Democrats, who rewarded the mob with political protection and construction contracts. In effect, the country's coalition politics relied on ingrained corruption to sustain an elaborate system of political patronage.⁷⁵

In the June 1953 elections, however, the Christian Democrats dropped to 40 percent of the vote, while the communist-socialist share rose to 35 percent. That troubling trend prompted the US National Security Council to launch an aggressive anti-communist psywar campaign to break their hold on labor unions, Operation Demagnetize, which failed to win the support of Prime Minister De Gasperi. He insisted on "the necessity of acting within the law," leaving Washington with "a strong sense of frustration for the scant results." In a parallel effort, however, the CIA provided its station chief (and future director) William Colby a \$25 million budget for its "largest covert political action program" to date, which increased the Christian Democrats' vote in 1958 only marginally to 42 percent.⁷⁶

After President John F. Kennedy's election in 1960, the US moderated its opposition to the Italian left, particularly the Socialists, allowing the Italian government to liberalize for the first time in the postwar period. In the April 1963 general elections, the left won 39 percent, one percentage point better than the Christian Democrats. To split the left and form a government, Christian Democrat prime minister Aldo Moro allied with the Socialists to forge a center-left coalition that angered the political right.⁷⁷

In response, starting in March 1964, the Carabinieri constabulary began plotting an abortive coup called Plan Solo that would deploy twenty thousand police officers to round up 730 leftist leaders for confinement in

Sardinia and oust the socialists from the government. According to a CIA cable, the plotting revolved around General De Lorenzo, the Carabinieri chief, who decided in early 1964 “that the present [Aldo] Moro government . . . must give way to . . . a Government of National Salvation or even to a revitalized Moro government with backbone.”⁷⁸ But when the press exposed the plot in June 1964, the coup collapsed as the coalition parties affirmed their support for Prime Minister Aldo Moro and the socialists, chastened by the threat of a coup, gave up their reform program.⁷⁹

With communists moving closer to power with each successive election, the right reacted with a “strategy of tension” that featured staged bombings meant to implicate the left and thereby spark state repression. In the process, they sparked two decades of political violence marked by bombings, killings, and abortive coups known in Italy as “the Years of Lead.” According to a government inquiry, from 1969 to 1987 there were 14,591 acts of politically motivated violence resulting in 491 dead and 1,181 injured—including a car bomb detonated in the city of Peteano in May 1972 that killed three Carabinieri police officers; an explosion on the Rome–Munich “Italicus Express” train in August 1974 that killed twelve and injured forty-eight; and a detonation that destroyed Bologna’s train station in August 1980, leaving eighty-five dead and two hundred injured.⁸⁰

Providing some context for this otherwise senseless violence, the Italian press later revealed that the “Black Prince,” Junio Borghese, head of the rightist Fronte Nazionale, had planned a coup that was likely coordinated with some of those explosions. Throughout 1969, neofascist militants created a climate of instability by setting off 145 explosions, culminating in the bombing at Milan’s Piazza Fontana in December, killing seventeen and wounding eighty-eight. By mid-1970, Prince Borghese’s network of “at least 5,000 hard-core activists” was fully mobilized, prompting General Vito Miceli, the head of Italy’s SID intelligence agency (Servizio Informazioni Difesa, the successor to SIFAR), to advise the US military attaché that a coup would likely take place in August. After learning of the plot independently, Ambassador Graham Martin advised Washington that any successful coup “would probably cause a massive leftward move in the political spectrum” and he was therefore “conveying to Prince Borghese the message that we do not believe . . . such measures are appropriate.” Nonetheless, on December 7, 1970, Borghese finally launched his coup as hundreds of neofascist militants and two hundred armed State Forestry

police massed in Rome where they stole 180 machine guns from the Interior Ministry in preparation for seizure of government buildings. Suddenly, Borghese got a phone call, reportedly from General Miceli's aide, and ordered a quiet retreat.⁸¹

Italians remained ignorant of the abortive coup until 1974 when General Miceli and seventy-seven others were arrested for "conspiring against the state." Although the general was ultimately found innocent, Parliament tried to democratize the SID intelligence service in 1977 by splitting it into separate domestic and military agencies. Four years later, a police raid discovered a list of 962 members of a rightist secret society that "read like a 'Who is Who in Italy'"—senior security officers like General Miceli, military commanders, and business leaders whose aim, said a parliamentary committee, was to intervene secretly in the political life of the country, including playing a central role in Prince Borghese's coup.⁸²

As the right was plotting, the Communist Party was evolving after the passing of its long-serving secretary-general, Palmiro Togliatti, a Soviet citizen who died in 1964 while vacationing in Crimea. In 1972, Enrico Berlinguer, a Sardinian aristocrat and talented politician, began a twelve-year term as communist secretary-general, raising the party's share of the vote from 27 percent in 1972 to a solid 34 percent in 1976, close to the Christian Democrats' 38 percent. Under a doctrine of Euro-Communism that distanced his party from Moscow and muted its opposition to NATO, Berlinguer forged a "historic compromise" with the Christian Democrats, supporting them in exchange for input on policymaking.⁸³

By 1972, therefore, the CIA's work was largely done. Italian communism had been tamed (though the youthful New Left was engaging in inchoate bombings). Even so, the Italian right wing and its clandestine Gladio stay-behind network, now operating beyond US control, continued their obsessive ideological war on the left. But the existence of the Gladio underground remained largely hearsay until October 1990, when Christian Democrat prime minister Giulio Andreotti told a parliamentary investigation that the CIA and Italy's SIFAR secret service had created 139 weapons caches with "portable arms, ammunition, explosives, hand grenades, knives and daggers, 60 mm. mortars, several 57 mm. recoilless rifles, sniper rifles, radio transmitters, binoculars, and various tools." Once the network was in place, he added, the Italian secret service, starting in 1959, had coordinated its Gladio operations through NATO's Clandestine

Planning Committee. At first, Italy's president, Francesco Cossiga, insisted that he was "proud and happy" about his role in setting up Gladio as a junior defense minister in the 1950s, but was later forced to resign amid the ensuing controversy.⁸⁴

The scandal expanded in February 1992 when an investigating magistrate in Milan, Antonio Di Pietro, arrested a Socialist Party leader in the act of taking a bribe. As this so-called Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) scandal grew, five thousand public figures came under investigation, half the members of Parliament were indicted, two prominent officials died by suicide, and four hundred city councils were dissolved on corruption charges. Sparked by the 1992 mafiosi murders of two investigating magistrates, investigations led to Andreotti's indictment for collusion with the Mafia, even though he was found not guilty after a lengthy trial. Within just two years, these scandals sparked a political storm that swept away the political parties that had ruled Italy throughout the Cold War—a change so fundamental that by 1994 Italy's First Republic had effectively ended.⁸⁵

While both the political corruption and complicity of Italian officials in the Gladio nexus were reasonably clear, it was still unclear whether the CIA controlled the network or was simply a catalyst for a local organization that had spun out of control. At the trial of a terrorist accused of the Piazza Fontana bombing, the former head of Italian counterintelligence, General Gianadelio Maletti, stated: "The CIA . . . wanted to create an Italian nationalism capable of halting what it saw as a slide to the left, and for this purpose it may have made use of right-wing terrorism."⁸⁶ In 2000, the Italian Senate issued a 326-page report about Gladio concluding: "Those massacres, those bombs, those military actions had been organized or promoted or supported by men inside Italian state institutions and . . . by men linked to the structures of United States Intelligence."⁸⁷

In the Cold War's early years, CIA intervention was critical in helping the Christian Democrats win the 1948 election and keeping the communists out of power, thereby assuring Italy's NATO membership. But these gains came at the price of fostering a postwar Italian Republic marked by systemic corruption, political violence, and coup attempts—a shaky structure that collapsed amid spectacular scandal as the Cold War ended.

POLITICAL INTRIGUES IN FRANCE

With its strong military, vast overseas empire, and seat on the U.N. Security Council, France was, from Washington's Cold War perspective, a critical element in containing communist advances in Western Europe. After four years of German wartime occupation, however, postwar France was mired in a moral, economic, and political crisis that made it susceptible to communist inroads. As France's future hung in the balance, the US used CIA covert operations to check the communists long enough for the Marshall Plan's economic aid to catalyze a sustained industrial revival that would eventually eclipse the left's chance for winning power.⁸⁸

During World War II, General Charles de Gaulle had become a national hero for leading the Free French forces from the Normandy landing to the liberation of Paris, where he formed a provisional government. But his blood rivals, the Communist Party, had also won wide support for its central role in the wartime resistance against the Nazi occupation. In the October 1945 Constituent Assembly elections, the communist party (PCF) placed first with 26 percent of the vote, General de Gaulle's MRP second with 25 percent, and the socialists third with 24 percent.⁸⁹

Beyond their electoral success, the communists had gained unprecedented political influence in postwar France—with followers in the intelligence service, the national paramilitary police, and even the military, particularly the Air Force. Moreover, the communist party's official newspaper, *L'Humanité*, was the country's most widely read paper, and its control of the CGT labor confederation (Confédération générale du travail) provided masses of followers for crippling strikes. Although the communist PCF had won a plurality in the 1945 elections, Prime Minister de Gaulle all but locked them out of his cabinet, restricting them to four minor posts. When the communist bloc in Parliament passed bills limiting his executive power in early 1946, he resigned in protest. Despite his dramatic gesture, the communists still increased their plurality to 29 percent in the November parliamentary elections.⁹⁰

At this high tide of communist influence, American ambassador Jefferson Caffery warned Washington that "the Communists now have sufficient strength to seize power in France whenever they may deem it desirable to do so." In February 1947, he described Paris as "a veritable hive of Comintern agents with their swarm of followers and dupes, of whom the already large number almost daily increases."⁹¹ In response to

these repeated warnings, Sidney Souers, executive secretary of the National Security Council, later ordered the US mission in France to conduct “psychological warfare operations to counter Soviet-inspired Communist propaganda” by “strengthening the overt activities of the Information Division of the Department of State” as well as “the conduct of covert activities [by] the Central Intelligence Agency.”⁹²

To that end, the CIA launched its Plan Blue to eliminate communist influence. Working with the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), the CIA shut down the existing French intelligence agency, which was filled with Communist resistance veterans of World War II, and replaced it with the anti-communist SDECE (Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage) under a reliable Socialist Party legislator, Henri Ribière. Simultaneously, those allied secret services worked with their French counterpart to create what the Socialist minister of interior Édouard Depreux called, in June 1947, “a black resistance network, made up of resistance fighters of the extreme-right, [Nazi] collaborators and monarchists.”⁹³

To reduce communist control over organized labor, the CIA used two American ex-communists to split the leftist CGT labor federation: Jay Lovestone, a Russian-born immigrant who led the American Communist Party before Stalin purged him in 1929, and his close ally Irving Brown, who was born in the Bronx and worked as an organizer for the United Auto Workers. After serving as labor representative on the War Production Board in Washington and doing “secret work” for the wartime Office of Strategic Services, the CIA’s predecessor, Brown landed at Paris in November 1945 as European representative for the American Federation of Labor. There, he threw himself into a lifelong battle against communist influence over labor in Italy, France, and, ultimately, the whole of Europe. Apart from being briefly shortlisted as director of the CIA’s covert-action adjunct, the Office of Policy Coordination, Brown preferred an arm’s-length relationship with Agency officers, whom he dismissed as “uninformed and irresponsible sophomores.” As his Agency contact Tom Braden recalled: “The CIA was handing over enormous sums of money to Lovestone and Brown for their network abroad, and it was always a sore point that we never got any accounting.” With such lavish funding and exceptional autonomy, Brown soon became Washington’s man on the spot in Paris, achieving extraordinary influence in the European labor movement.⁹⁴

The labor issue came to the fore in April 1947 when the CGT confederation launched a strike at the Renault car factory, which quickly snowballed into a nationwide shutdown. In response, socialist prime minister Paul Ramadier rejected the labor confederation's demands by ordering a wage freeze and, in response to American pressures, used the dispute to eject all Communist Party members from his cabinet. In May, however, Ramadier finally promised a bonus for increased output and Renault's workers accepted the offer, despite communist demands for an unconditional wage increase. Six months later, when labor unrest again erupted into a nationwide general strike, pitched battles occurred between strikers and security services, both the riot police and the 11th Shock Parachute Regiment, SDECE's covert-action adjunct. In the midst of the violence, Brown used CIA cash to hire Corsican mobsters to break the picket lines on the docks of the southern French city of Marseilles. After 1950, Brown would shunt Agency funds through a Swiss bank account to a fiery Corsican gangster, Pierre Ferri-Pisani, who ran the Marseilles's waterfront and led a regional stevedores' organization, the Mediterranean Vigilance Committee, that prevented communist blockages of Marshall Plan aid shipments.⁹⁵

Just days after those exceptionally violent strikes ended in December 1947, the CIA produced a permanent breach in the ranks of the CGT labor confederation. By distributing CARE packages to hungry workers and paying the Socialist Party \$1 million a year, Brown engineered the formation of a separate Socialist union, Force Ouvrière. In a celebratory cable, Ambassador Caffery wrote: "From the point of view of our interest in the survival of democracy in western Europe, the scission yesterday in the CGT is the most important event that has occurred in France since the Liberation." Illustrating his deep involvement with the French Socialists, Brown would continue to deliver a CIA subsidy to their leadership until the late 1960s and attend every Force Ouvrière annual convention for the next forty years, almost to the end of the Cold War.⁹⁶

Over the longer term, the CIA tried to shape French political culture through pervasive propaganda. In 1950, to mobilize intellectuals against the Soviets and thereby challenge communist dominance of political discourse, Irving Brown and others formed the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris as a front for pro-Western cultural activities. Through a secret CIA subsidy, the Congress would host conferences and publish the journal *Preuves*,

which paid French intellectuals handsomely for articles criticizing Soviet excesses. Beyond France, the CIA funded the formation of Radio Free Europe to broadcast propaganda into communist Eastern Europe, with Brown giving the inaugural address in May 1951 from its new studios in Munich, West Germany. To counter the Soviet-sponsored World Peace Council, whose anti-nuclear Stockholm Appeal petition, launched in 1950, was signed by many millions across Europe, Washington conducted a campaign of “psychological warfare” by giving the CIA ample funds to subsidize several French newspapers and finance a civic organization, Paix et Liberté (Peace and Freedom), which plastered the streets of Paris with emotive anti-communist posters.⁹⁷

Just as it had done in both Greece and Italy, NATO’s Operation Gladio worked with French intelligence to organize a secret stay-behind network that cached radios, weapons, and explosives in readiness for a possible communist takeover. During his service in France from 1953 to 1956, CIA officer Edward Barnes found that the French recruits for this underground network were largely war veterans, but he “had no record of how many people would come out of the woodwork” should a crisis arise. By contrast, the director of French intelligence later claimed that secret network had ten thousand troops “outside the ranks of the French armed forces” trained for secret warfare by the 11th Shock Parachute Regiment.⁹⁸

The dangers of fostering an underground army outside the chain of command became apparent during the 1958 crisis that toppled France’s Fourth Republic and installed General Charles de Gaulle as prime minister. As the Algerian revolt against French colonial rule entered its fourth year, the French military grew restive at the government’s conciliatory response to the rebels. Although General de Gaulle had retired to the countryside after resigning as prime minister in 1946, his chief operative, Jacques Foccart, played upon these tensions to launch a coup using intelligence contacts and his private “parallel police,” the Service d’Action Civique, which the French Parliament described as “a secret organization readily capable of clandestine activity.”⁹⁹

In May 1958, a military junta, led by General Raoul Salan, declared Algeria independent and called upon de Gaulle to take power in France itself. After the 11th Shock paratroopers occupied Corsica and prepared to seize Paris, de Gaulle met secretly with the prime minister, who then resigned, allowing de Gaulle to assume power in a de facto coup d’état. To

legitimize his new government, that September de Gaulle held a plebiscite on his proposed constitution for a Fifth Republic—winning the approval of 83 percent of French voters and delivering a serious blow to the already weakened communists, who had vainly opposed de Gaulle’s efforts.¹⁰⁰

Once in power, de Gaulle quickly recognized that the war against Algeria’s independence movement was doomed and began working to free the colony from French rule. Reacting to this perceived betrayal, General Salan and his coterie of right-wing generals formed the O.A.S. (Organisation de l’Armée Secrète) and launched a two-year underground revolt against the French state, killing some two thousand people in both Algeria and France while nearly assassinating de Gaulle himself. According to Charles Cogan, who headed the CIA’s Paris station in the late 1980s, many of the 11th Shock paratroopers affiliated with the secret stay-behind operation “undertook terrorist-type actions on behalf of O.A.S. in Algeria and/or elsewhere”—a claim confirmed by the former head of the French secret service, Admiral Pierre Lacoste, who admitted that some “terrorist actions” against de Gaulle were done by “a limited number of people” from Operation Gladio’s own stay-behind network.¹⁰¹

After quashing the revolt and consolidating control, President de Gaulle forged the three forms of state authority needed, in a Cold War context, to make France an independent global power—a strong secret service, its own neocolonial territory, and nuclear weapons. With the president’s backing, Foccart’s private militia, the Service d’Action Civique, and the French secret service formed a potent covert apparatus that checked the undercover operations of both the Soviet K.G.B. and the CIA.¹⁰² After granting France’s African colonies their independence in 1960, de Gaulle, working through his “man of shadows” Foccart, created a sprawling neocolonial imperium in Francophone West Africa called “Françafrique.”¹⁰³ Finally, after a successful atomic test in the Algerian desert in 1960, de Gaulle began building a nuclear force that soon became the world’s third largest.

So armed, President de Gaulle quit N.A.T.O.’s joint command in 1966 and expelled both its conventional forces and covert-action apparatus from France.¹⁰⁴ Freed from N.A.T.O.’s constraints, he played Cold War peacemaker, making state visits to Moscow, Warsaw, and Bucharest where he called for “détente, entente, and cooperation”—in effect, encouraging nuclear détente between the US and U.S.S.R., which came just three years later.¹⁰⁵ On balance, France’s geopolitical position at Europe’s western periphery ensured that its

break with NATO left the Western alliance only diminished but not seriously damaged, unlike the simultaneous Sino-Soviet split in 1962–64, which rendered the Soviet Union geopolitically isolated on the vast Eurasian landmass.

LESSONS FROM A COLD WAR BATTLEGROUND

By the mid-1950s, the Cold War had achieved a tense stability in Europe, with a militarized Iron Curtain dividing the continent from the Baltic Sea to the Balkans. Indeed, there was a rough equivalence between the NATO alliance with fifteen member nations (and a total population of 420 million) and the Warsaw Pact's eight member states (with 270 million people). Squared off across the heart of Europe, 150 Warsaw Pact divisions faced just twenty-five active-duty NATO divisions. Both were backed by armadas of artillery, tanks, bombers, and nuclear-armed missiles so lethal that Europe was fast approaching a strategic stalemate.^{[106](#)}

Adding to that standoff, the superpowers had achieved a certain parity in the covert operations they used to control their respective European spheres, lending a Sisyphean quality to their espionage. While the CIA's rightist alliances and NATO's Gladio underground secured Western Europe, admittedly at the cost of some political instability, the fusion of state security and Soviet military strength both checked Western influence and stifled political change in Eastern Europe. With neither superpower willing to contest the other's European sphere through either conventional or covert means, their rivalry would soon shift to surrogate warfare in what was coming to be known as the "Third World" of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

As the Cold War's first battleground, Europe exemplified key aspects of the global conflict to come. Just as France withdrew from NATO in 1966 once it had its own nuclear weapons, so Beijing broke definitively with Moscow following its first atomic test in 1965—a parallel that revealed the need for every nation, in a Cold War context, to either shelter beneath a superpower's nuclear umbrella or develop its own atomic arsenal.

The modern French state, with its two-hundred-year history, had sufficient resilience to recover from both wartime Nazi occupation and postwar US intervention, as evidenced by its formation of a fourth and even

a fifth republic. In less stable states like Greece, by contrast, CIA operations, combined with US funding for an oversized military, gave the ultra-right the institutional coherence to successfully seize power in a coup d'état. Simultaneously, in Italy, CIA electoral manipulations facilitated both a center-right ruling coalition and a neofascist revival that rendered Italy's first republic so inherently unstable that it collapsed as the Cold War ended.

In the early decades of that global conflict, such dramatic developments in Europe resonated far beyond the continent itself, shaping Soviet defense policy and penetrating deep within American society as Washington mobilized for the sustained global warfare whose demands were first felt on the Korean Peninsula.



General James Van Fleet, commander of the US 8th Army, inspects members of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, South Korea, December 1951. (Credit: Australian War Memorial)

CHAPTER 4

WAR IN KOREA

At 3:00 p.m. on October 1, 1949, the head of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao Zedong, stood atop Beijing's majestic Tiananmen Gate, the symbolic center of Chinese state power, with a million people gathered beneath his feet. "The Central People's Government Council of the People's Republic of China took office today in the capital," he announced into a microphone that could blast his words across the vast square, "and is the sole legal government representing all the people of the People's Republic of China." That victory was, he said, the work of the People's Liberation Army, which "has been fighting heroically and selflessly to defend the territorial sovereignty of our homeland, . . . to relieve the people of their sufferings, and to struggle for their rights."¹ Then, for the next three hours, sixteen thousand troops, a hundred artillery pieces, and 150 tanks paraded through Tiananmen Square. The many thousands who applauded that victory parade could not have imagined that, within a year, their army would be fighting another desperate war, this time in Korea against the overwhelming firepower of the US military.²

The decolonization of Asia and the start of the Cold War coincided to produce two hard-fought regional conflicts—the French Indochina War and the Korean War—that would have widespread global reverberations. Among the countless conflicts, large and small, that marked the Cold War, the Korean conflict was arguably the greatest tragedy, reducing the region to a wasteland and producing tensions that would persist to the present moment, threatening the world with nuclear warfare. Moreover, as the first armed conflict between the United States and the Sino-Soviet bloc in Asia, the Korean War started a geopolitical rivalry that would continue to the very end of the Cold War.

THE COLD WAR COMES TO ASIA

Given Imperial Japan's prewar hegemony, at the end of World War II Washington felt the key to its Asia-Pacific presence lay in Tokyo, where the head of the US occupation government, General Douglas MacArthur, exercised absolute power, unrestrained by any Allied commission akin to the one in Germany. By seizing a hundred military bases in Japan and signing a bases agreement with the now-independent Philippines in 1947, Washington began building the Pacific littoral into the geopolitical hinge for its global power, facilitating its defense of one continent (North America) and its dominance over another (Eurasia). As MacArthur himself argued in mid-1950, by occupying "a chain of islands extending from the Aleutians," the US had made "the entire Pacific Ocean . . . a vast moat to protect . . . all of the Americas and free lands of . . . Asia." He added pointedly: "From this island chain we can dominate with air power every Asiatic port from Vladivostok to Singapore and prevent any hostile movement into the Pacific."³

By the late 1940s, Washington's position in the Asia-Pacific region seemed stable and secure—with Japan occupied, the US Navy patrolling the Pacific Ocean, its ally Chiang Kai-shek still governing much of China, and its European allies ruling their Southeast Asian colonies. In contrast, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin proved more cautious and surprisingly reticent about supporting Asian communist parties in their anti-colonial struggles. While Washington was building its Pacific bastion, Stalin was engaged in shifting strategic maneuvers to secure his nation's vast frontier, privileging Soviet security over support for Asian communism.⁴ In such a geopolitical context, the Communist Party's victory in China's long civil war and its seizure of power at Beijing in October 1949 sent shock waves reverberating through Washington and the Western alliance.

Through the sheer weight of its demographic and geopolitical impact, the communist victory in China's civil war changed the course of world history, transforming the Cold War from a regional power struggle over Eastern Europe into a volatile global conflict. Demographics alone dictated the significance of the event. China had 560 million people, about 20 percent of the world's population. Over half of humanity lived in Asia, making that continent's entry into the Cold War transformative.⁵

Geopolitics compounded the force of demography. The Sino-Soviet alliance of 1950 gave the communist bloc an enormous geographical

footprint astride Eurasia, challenging Washington's control over a continent whose sheer size, spanning six thousand miles east to west, made it the epicenter of global geopolitical power. Instead of focusing solely on NATO and Europe to contain the Soviet Union behind an Iron Curtain, Washington now had to control both axial ends of the sprawling Eurasian continent through military alliances in the Atlantic and the Pacific. In sum, the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949 and its entry into the Korean War a year later would force Washington to shift its Cold War strategy from defending Western Europe to dominating the whole of Eurasia.

The communist capture of Beijing in 1949 was the culmination of thirty years of war and revolution that had roiled that vast country with almost unimaginable violence. For over a thousand years, China had been the most powerful empire on the planet, with centralized government, advanced technology, and a thriving economy. But in the mid-nineteenth century, Britain's coal-fired industrial revolution and global imperial expansion coincided with and catalyzed China's decline. After it lost the two Opium Wars of 1840 and 1856, European imperial powers negotiated "unequal treaties" that granted them "extra-territorial" immunity from local laws and territorial "concessions" along China's coast.⁶

Almost from the very start, China's struggle to shed imperial influence collided headlong with the rise of the Japanese empire. When the post-World War I Versailles Peace Conference transferred Germany's Shandong concession in China to Japan, some three thousand students from a dozen Beijing universities protested in Tiananmen Square on May 4, 1919, sparking a cultural ferment that led to the founding of both the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) by Sun Yat-sen in 1919 and the Communist Party in 1921.⁷

After his party's founding, Sun Yat-sen invited the communists to join his regional government at Canton (now Guangzhou). In 1927, the KMT's Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek led both parties on the famous "Northern Expedition" that captured the great industrial city of Shanghai. But at that moment of victory, the union between the two parties broke down and Chiang, in alliance with a local crime syndicate, turned on his communist allies and slaughtered them in the city streets. The Communist Party then retreated to the countryside of southeastern China and later to the far north where its new leader, Mao Zedong, led it on a twenty-year revolutionary

war against the Nationalist regime. By the end of World War II, the communists' armed resistance against the Japanese military occupation had given them a conventional army capable of defeating the Nationalists in positional warfare.⁸

After pushing south from Manchuria to capture Beijing and Shanghai in 1949, the People's Liberation Army pounded some two million Nationalist troops into a pell-mell retreat that sent them first to south China and then, by December, across the straits to Taiwan island. After four years of intense civil warfare, casualties on both sides totaled over six hundred thousand dead and two million wounded.⁹

The sudden communist victory in China reverberated around the world. In Southeast Asia, fraternal communist parties in Burma, Indonesia, Indochina, and the Philippines saw the Chinese triumph as evidence that history was on their side. Beyond Asia, this outcome created a powerful Sino-Soviet bloc with the raw demographic and military power to change the course of world history.

In the United States, a successful Soviet atomic test in August 1949, combined with Mao's victory in October, unleashed waves of apprehension. Republicans blamed President Harry Truman for the "loss of China." Just three months later, Senator Joseph McCarthy launched a witch hunt that brought the country's anti-communist fervor to a fever pitch. Mass organizations, like the Committee of One Million Against the Admission of China to the United Nations, made the "China Lobby" a major force in US politics.¹⁰ Beyond the partisan name-calling, the rise of communist China presented a serious strategic threat to Washington's geopolitical dominance over Eurasia—home to 70 percent of the world's population and the historic epicenter of global power.

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Right after proclaiming the People's Republic of China in October 1949, Mao made a two-month trip to Moscow seeking an alliance that would protect his new government from a possible US-led invasion. In a seemingly euphoric cable to comrades in Beijing that December, Mao said: "[We] arrived in Moscow on the 16th and . . . met with Stalin for two hours at 10 p.m. His attitude was really sincere. The questions involved included

the possibility of peace, the treaty, loan, Taiwan, and the publication of my selected works.” But Stalin also surprised Mao by refusing to give up the territorial concessions in Manchuria that Moscow had won at the 1945 Yalta Conference, saying that they could discuss the issue at their next meeting.¹¹

For seventeen days during a freezing Moscow winter, Mao cooled his heels inside a drafty dacha where, as he later recalled, “I got so angry that I once pounded the table.” Finally, on January 2, 1950, Mao cabled his Communist Central Committee: “Our work here has achieved an important breakthrough in the past two days. Comrade Stalin has finally agreed to . . . sign a new Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship.”¹²

With Russia giving up its Manchurian concessions, the two nations signed that Friendship Treaty in February 1950 with an important mutual-defense clause. In a complementary measure, China’s new constitution hailed the country’s “indestructible friendship” with the Soviet Union. But by granting China an alliance in such a begrudging manner, Stalin planted the seeds for the later Sino-Soviet split, embittering Mao, who later said Russians “have never had faith in the Chinese people, and Stalin was among the worst.”¹³

In marked contrast to the rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow, American relations with the Chinese Communist Party soured quickly. When Washington withdrew all its diplomats in the summer of 1949, Mao denounced the Americans, saying: “The war to turn China into a US colony . . . has been an important component of US imperialist policy of world-wide aggression since World War II.”¹⁴

GEOPOLITICS OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Only months after signing that Friendship Treaty, Stalin maneuvered Mao into entering the Korean War as a Soviet surrogate, making China a major player in both the Cold War and the future of Korea. As the communist revolution was struggling to free China from a century of imperial influence, Korea was emerging from three decades of direct Japanese colonial rule that left deep political divisions on the peninsula.

After nearly a millennium as an independent kingdom, Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910 and subjected to an extreme form of colonization marked by complete cultural assimilation and political integration into

metropolitan Japan as a mere province.¹⁵ Most of the Korean political elite collaborated with the Japanese colonial regime, but an activist few rejected such enforced cultural extinction by embracing either communism or Christianity. When the Japanese occupied Manchuria in 1932, the large Korean diaspora there formed communist guerrilla units, including several led by the future North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. After serving in the Soviet Army during World War II, he returned to Korea in 1945 and revived the communist party, becoming secretary-general that December and later head of a Soviet-sponsored provisional government in the north. More moderate leaders used their Christian connections to seek refuge in the United States. Educated at Methodist mission schools, the future South Korean leader Syngman Rhee fled to the United States, where he led the highly factionalized exile movement while earning a doctoral degree from Princeton University.¹⁶

Although the Cairo Declaration of 1943 called for a unified Korea, in August 1945 Soviet and US occupation forces effected a de facto division of the country. Working “late at night” and “under great pressure” in Washington, Colonel Dean Rusk, the future secretary of state, picked a line marking the 38th parallel on a *National Geographic* map as the temporary border—splitting the country in half and giving both sides major cities (Pyongyang in the north and Seoul in the south). Just days before World War II ended in September 1945, the Soviet Red Army marched into Japanese-occupied Korea but stopped its advance for three weeks at the 38th parallel, biding its time until US troops could arrive. After landing at Incheon near Seoul on September 8 to accept the surrender of Japanese troops in the south, General John Hodge stayed on as head of the US Army Military Government until South Korea’s independence in 1948.¹⁷

Complicating that occupation, in October 1945 General Douglas MacArthur, the head of the US military government in occupied Japan, sent the prickly exiled nationalist Syngman Rhee back to Korea on his personal aircraft. State Department officials had long regarded Rhee as “a dangerous mischief maker,” but General Hodge soon found his fervent anti-communism and leadership of the country’s conservative landlords useful in countering a surge in strikes, demonstrations, and armed resistance that roiled the south. Although a US-USSR conference in Moscow that December agreed on a joint commission to plan independence for a unified Korea, within a year the superpowers had laid the foundations for separate

states. In May 1948, the US military government, with UN approval, presided over elections for a constituent assembly that, in turn, selected Syngman Rhee as South Korea's president. With General MacArthur at his side, Rhee proclaimed the Republic of Korea (ROK) on August 15. Within a month, Soviet officials reciprocated by establishing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north under Kim Il Sung.^{[18](#)}

Both Rhee and Kim insisted that the country be unified under their sole leadership. With the exception of that one similarity, the two states would become a study in contrasts. While industry and electrical generation were concentrated in the north, South Korea was an agricultural nation with twenty million largely poor people and just ninety-eight thousand badly trained troops, no tanks, and only twenty-two aircraft. North Korea, by contrast, had ten million people with an industrial infrastructure and a well-organized army of two hundred thousand troops, 210 propeller-driven fighter planes, and 280 Soviet T-34 tanks (at that time the world's best).

At the broadest level, the Korean War arose from a convergence of global tensions and local uncertainties over the political future of the Korean Peninsula—circumstances that allowed both Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung to manipulate their respective superpower patrons. Between 1948 and 1950, Kim Il Sung repeatedly, if unsuccessfully, pressed a reluctant Stalin to unify Korea by force of arms. When Kim visited Moscow in April 1950 to urge war, Stalin, now encouraged by the communist victory in China and the Soviet development of the atomic bomb, was also looking for new ways to test the West after the failure of his Berlin blockade. Since Stalin said his go-ahead was conditional upon Mao's approval, Kim visited Beijing in May. Mao, who harbored reservations about such a move, deferred to Stalin and agreed to an attack on South Korea. With Kim's assurance that a quick victory was certain, Moscow sent artillery and Soviet advisers who drew up plans for a strike south, starting a bloody war that would unfold in four distinct phases.^{[19](#)}

PHASE ONE: NORTH KOREA ATTACKS

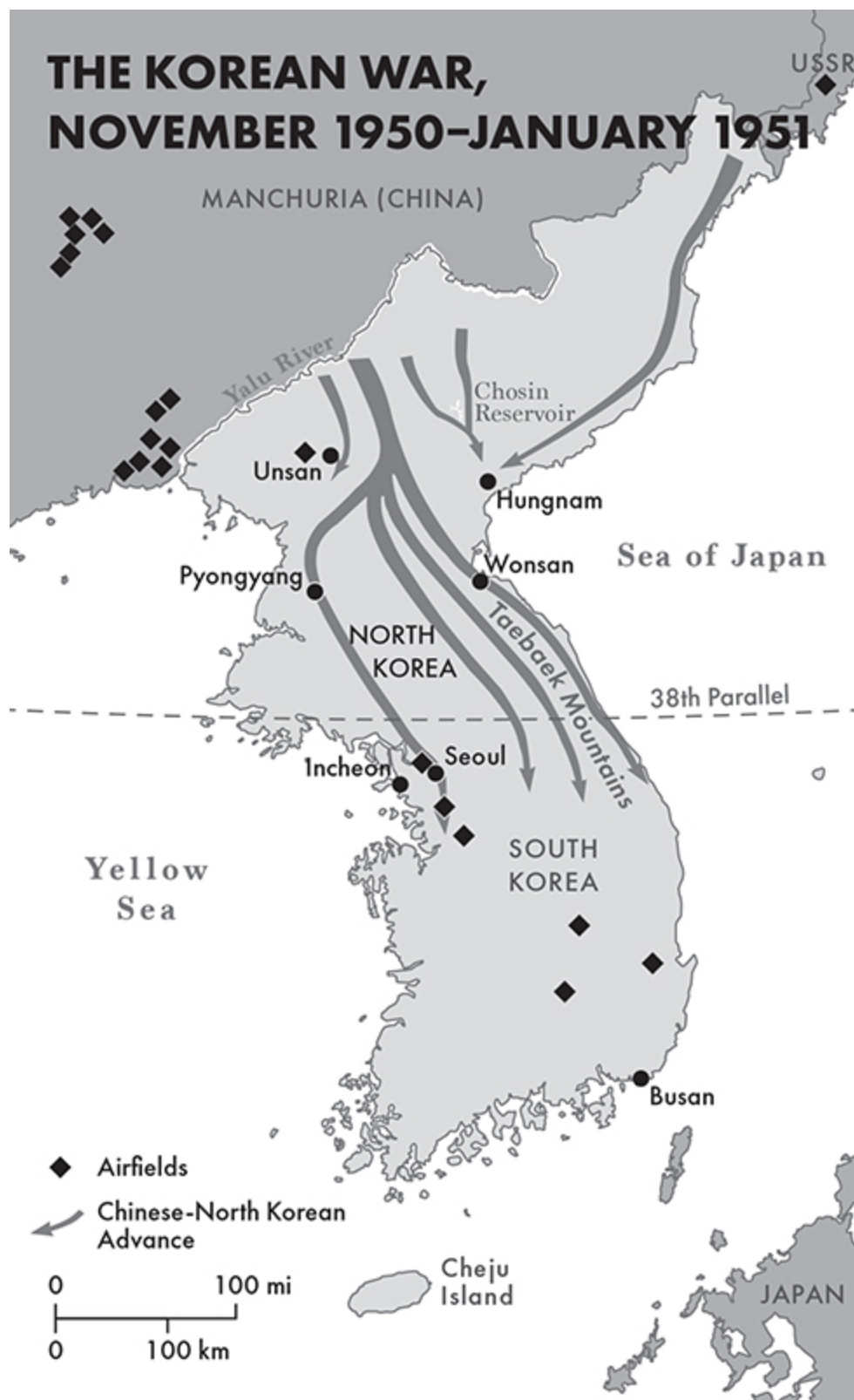
At dawn on June 25, 1950, North Korean forces surged south across the 38th parallel, determined to win a quick victory. Two days later, the Rhee government fled Seoul in panic, its forces blowing up the Hangang Bridge

across the Han River to stop the North Korean advance while four thousand refugees were still crossing, killing hundreds of them. Even though the R.O.K. army was collapsing, the South Korean police and military reacted to the communist invasion by slaughtering one hundred thousand suspected leftists, including many of the thirty thousand political prisoners already held in their jails.²⁰

During the first five days of war, the North Korean attack decimated the R.O.K. army, cutting its effective forces from ninety-five thousand to just twenty-two thousand men. Poorly trained and ill-equipped, US forces stationed in the South also suffered badly in the war's first weeks, with the 24th Division losing 30 percent of its troops. For three months, the North Korean offensive pushed American and South Korean troops down the peninsula into a coastal enclave in its southeastern corner at the city of Busan. After weeks of pounding US lines, the North Korean army launched a massive offensive in late August that threatened to force an American evacuation from the peninsula. As it happened, though, the North Koreans had exhausted their reserves of manpower and firepower and the attack soon stalled. Meanwhile, fresh US troops were arriving daily from Japan, raising U.N. forces to 140,000, outnumbering the North Korean People's Army, which had about 70,000 men left.²¹

The initial communist success on the battlefield was also soon offset by serious diplomatic reverses. Despite Washington's reservations about Syngman Rhee and the parlous state of its own postwar military, it moved quickly to save South Korea from what seemed a likely conquest. Just forty-eight hours after North Korea's attack began, President Truman threw down the gauntlet—ordering US forces in Japan to support the South's troops, sending the Navy's 7th Fleet into the Taiwan Straits “to prevent any attack on Formosa,” and increasing military aid to both French Indochina and the Philippines.²² When the American representative introduced a resolution at the U.N. Security Council condemning the North Korean attack, the Soviet ambassador was boycotting proceedings, which meant the council was able to agree to “furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the attack.” That aid consisted of twenty-two nations sending troops there to fight under an unprecedented U.N. command. Significantly, Truman did not ask Congress for a formal declaration of war, initiating a steady accretion of executive authority over foreign policy that would continue for the rest of the Cold War.²³

THE KOREAN WAR, NOVEMBER 1950–JANUARY 1951



After heavy cuts that had reduced the US defense budget from \$960 billion in 1945 to just \$95 billion by 1948, Truman now more than doubled military funding to \$225 billion in 1951, only to double it again to \$435 billion for 1953. To mobilize industry and rebuild a military whose signs of weakness were legion—notably, a Navy without sufficient ships to blockade Korea and an Army forced to recover World War II tanks from storage and display pedestals—Truman declared a wartime emergency.²⁴

PHASE TWO: US COUNTERATTACK

Since the first US forces had landed in South Korea without adequate tanks, aircraft, or artillery to fight the well-equipped North Korean army, casualties in the first months of war were exceptionally heavy. Still, from the embattled Busan enclave at Korea's southeastern tip, the US commander, General MacArthur, executed a bold stroke that changed the course of the war. On September 15, 1950, an armada of 260 ships steamed up Korea's west coast through the heaving seas of a typhoon and landed forty thousand American and nine thousand South Korean troops at Incheon near Seoul to liberate the South Korean capital. In the fighting that followed, the US Air Force inflicted heavy losses the North Koreans could ill afford. Meanwhile, airstrikes in the south along the Busan perimeter pounded enemy lines, clearing the way for a UN offensive that sparked a disorderly North Korean retreat and reduced their army to just thirty thousand surviving troops. On October 7, the UN endorsed the unification of Korea, indicating that an emboldened West was quickly moving beyond the mere defense of South Korea.²⁵

At an emergency session of the Soviet Politburo on September 27, 1950, Stalin condemned the incompetence of the North Koreans and their Soviet advisers. Although Stalin refused to increase Soviet aid, he cabled Mao on October 1 saying: "I think that . . . in the current situation . . . you should move at least five or six divisions toward the 38th parallel at once."²⁶ Two days later, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai sent Washington a warning via the Indian ambassador that if its troops crossed that parallel, "we would not be bystanders; we would intervene."²⁷ Meanwhile, the Chinese communist leadership was moving troops across Manchuria at night to arrive undetected near the Korean border.

While Stalin was fuming in Moscow, on September 30 Washington instructed General MacArthur to feel “unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38th parallel.”²⁸ Since North Korea’s center was dominated by the impassable Taebaek Mountains, UN forces advanced beyond the 38th parallel in two columns. The US 8th Army drove up the west coast to capture Pyongyang on October 19, while the 10th Corps swept up the east coast for an amphibious landing, aided by a South Korean advance on land to secure the port of Wonsan. By the end of October, North Korea’s surviving 25,000 regulars were incapable of slowing a UN army of 230,000 combat troops sweeping north toward the Chinese border at the Yalu River.²⁹

Amid this rapid advance, President Truman met MacArthur mid-Pacific at Wake Island on October 15 and asked about the “chances for Chinese or Soviet interference.” The general promptly waved away such concerns, dismissing the Chinese military’s capacity for combat. “We are no longer fearful of their intervention,” the general said. “If the Chinese tried to get to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter.”³⁰

PHASE THREE: CHINA’S INTERVENTION

Just four days later on October 19, however, three hundred thousand Chinese soldiers from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) crossed the Yalu River into North Korea, entering a war that would then drag on bloodily for nearly three years and cost China at least four hundred thousand combat deaths. Beijing’s decision to enter the Korean War arose from a confluence of foreign policy pressures and its own national security concerns. After Truman’s naval blockade prevented any Chinese attack on the island of Taiwan, Beijing transferred those troops north to the Korean border. Once Stalin agreed to defend China from any future American invasion, the Chinese Politburo decided to go to war on October 18. Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Marshal Peng Dehuai agreed that their forces would intervene to prevent North Korea’s collapse.³¹

After crossing the Yalu River’s bridges in the dark without detection, the PLA’s 13th Army attacked UN forces near the border on November 1, 1950, surprising the US First Cavalry Division near Unsan and killing over

a thousand American soldiers. However, they then withdrew so quickly that American commanders refused to believe China had actually intervened.³²

Unconvinced that Chinese forces were fighting in Korea, General MacArthur made a major strategic miscalculation and ordered the drive north to continue, sending his forces into a virtual ambush. On November 25, on the western side of the peninsula, the Chinese 13th Army overran South Korea's II Corps at the Chongchon River and then pounded the US 2nd Infantry Division. The US 8th Army commenced a chaotic retreat, falling back to the 38th parallel by mid-December.³³

While the UN position in the west was collapsing, in the east the American X Corps fought a seventeen-day battle at Chosin Reservoir that bloodied the Chinese sufficiently to allow an orderly withdrawal for the surviving troops. In bitter cold between November 27 and December 13, some 30,000 UN troops near that reservoir were encircled by 120,000 Chinese soldiers determined to destroy them. Under heavy fire and constant attacks, however, the American forces managed to retreat to the east coast port of Hungnam for an orderly evacuation. In a "Christmas miracle," a flotilla of Navy warships and merchant freighters carried a hundred thousand UN troops and ninety-eight thousand Korean civilians south to safety at Busan.³⁴

After rejecting a UN armistice offer on December 16, China made a bid for total victory by launching a Third Phase Offensive on New Year's Eve of 1950, using surprise night attacks to demoralize UN forces, with many US troops breaking ranks to flee. In the midst of that debacle, communist forces captured Seoul for a second time on January 4, 1951. Four days later, Beijing issued orders reading: "When the next campaign starts . . . we will annihilate all enemies and liberate all Korea."³⁵

Under pressure from this offensive, UN forces retreated to a line just south of the 38th parallel that held largely because the Chinese, forced to transport all their food and ammunition two hundred miles from the Yalu River border by backpack or bicycle, simply could not maintain battle lines much beyond that limit. Finding that the Chinese advance had stalled, the commander of the US 8th Army, General Matthew Ridgway, ordered his forces to push north once again, recapturing Seoul in March 1951 and advancing his lines all the way back to the 38th parallel.³⁶

In addition, the US had an absolute control of the skies. In the wake of China's intervention, General MacArthur simply ordered the destruction of

North Korea's cities. By February 1951, after just eight months of war, the Air Force commander, General Hoyt Vandenberg, complained that there were not "enough targets left in North Korea to keep the air force busy."³⁷

Although President Truman was at this point only committed to a limited-war strategy in Korea, General MacArthur became vocal in his demands for escalation. On March 24, 1951, he issued a public statement calling on China to admit that it had been defeated, implicitly challenging Truman's role as commander in chief. On April 5, the Republican leader in the House of Representatives read a letter from MacArthur, saying: "If we lose the war to communism in Asia, the fall of Europe is inevitable; win it and Europe most probably would avoid war and yet preserve freedom." In the view of General Ridgway, MacArthur's strategy carried "the very considerable risk of igniting World War III and [the] consequent overrunning of Western Europe." Within just five days, Truman reacted to MacArthur's rank insubordination by relieving him of command and promoting Ridgway as his replacement. With his characteristic candor, Truman said: "I didn't fire him because he was a dumb son of a bitch, though he was, but that's not against the law for generals. If it was, half to three-quarters of them would be in jail."³⁸

Speaking before Congress to thundering ovations on April 19, 1951, MacArthur condemned those who "would appease Red China." But in closed-door congressional testimony, the chair of the Joint Chiefs, General Omar Bradley, explained the strategic risks for any wider war, pointing out that there were five hundred thousand Russian troops in the Far East that could readily overwhelm US forces.³⁹

FINAL PHASE: TOWARD ARMISTICE

Freed from MacArthur's chimera of a wider war against China, UN forces were now led by General Matthew Ridgway while General James Van Fleet arrived to take command of the US 8th Army, which constituted the bulk of UN combat forces. Within a matter of weeks, this new leadership would face a severe challenge.

Under pressure from Mao and Stalin, Marshal Peng Dehuai mounted his Fifth Phase Offensive, the biggest of the war, in a bid to break through UN lines near the 38th parallel and once again capture Seoul. In April and May

1951, some 400,000 Chinese and North Korean troops attacked 340,000 UN defenders, penetrating their lines before being pushed back by a relentless pounding from American airpower and artillery. Then, the 8th Army launched a surprise counteroffensive, turning the Chinese retreat into a rout and inflicting heavy casualties. With the tide of war turning in his favor, General Van Fleet wanted to drive north to Pyongyang, but Ridgway, mindful of the president's recent decision to seek an armistice, ordered the offensive halted. By the time those operations were done, however, the Chinese had lost a hundred thousand men and were "compelled to concede stalemate."⁴⁰

In the aftermath of that debacle, Mao suggested a cease-fire, but Stalin objected, saying: "A drawn out war . . . gives the possibility to the Chinese troops to study contemporary warfare on the field of battle and . . . shakes up the Truman regime in America and harms the military prestige of Anglo-American troops."⁴¹ Within a month, however, the Soviet delegate to the UN proposed a cease-fire and, on July 10, 1951, armistice negotiations began their fitful two-year course to an agreement.⁴²

Reflecting the military realities that barred another major Chinese offensive, in February 1952 Marshal Peng erupted in anger before Premier Zhou Enlai at a civil-military conference. "You have this and that problem," the marshal insisted. "You should go to the front and see with your own eyes what food and clothing the soldiers have! Not to speak of the casualties! For what are they giving their lives? We have no aircraft. We have only a few guns. Transports are not protected. More and more soldiers are dying of starvation. Can't you overcome some of your difficulties?"⁴³

With ground combat stalemated, the US Air Force seized the opportunity to demonstrate its superiority by launching a massive strategic bombing campaign. In June 1951, that air war expanded with Operation Strangle in a bid to interdict enemy supply efforts. In a fateful harbinger of the future war in Vietnam, the North Koreans countered skillfully by building secondary roads and moving factories to remote locations. When tactical interdiction failed, the US switched to wholesale destruction under Operation Pressure Pump, blasting every road and rail, as well as every city and town of any significance, including Pyongyang. To protect its bombers from enemy attacks, the Air Force had just ninety new F-85 Sabre jets as opposed to the four hundred MiG jet fighters flown by Chinese, North Korean, and, increasingly, Russian pilots.⁴⁴ By war's end, some seventy-two thousand

Soviet air and ground personnel had in fact been committed to the conflict, including five thousand MiG pilots who dressed in Chinese uniforms and tried to speak Chinese in their cockpits to conceal Soviet involvement—a fiction Washington readily accepted.⁴⁵

Determined to conclude the deadlocked peace talks on favorable terms, in June 1952 the Pentagon permitted air attacks on thirteen hydroelectric facilities that damaged 90 percent of North Korea's power. In May 1953, Washington even approved the bombing of five major North Korean irrigation dams. A hit on the Toksan Dam unleashed such a torrent that the 27-mile river valley below the dam was swept clean of roads, rails, and rice fields.⁴⁶ By war's end, senior diplomat Dean Rusk stated that America had bombed "everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another." Although the Air Force was convinced that airpower had forced China and North Korea to the bargaining table, historian Bruce Cumings disagreed. As he put it: "Saturation bombing was not conclusive . . . just unimaginably destructive."⁴⁷

With the war stalemated and the front lines stable, General Van Fleet devoted himself to developing South Korea's fledgling army into an effective fighting force. Since army chief J. Lawton Collins had given him "complete say in Korea," Van Fleet had ample autonomy to set priorities for his command. When he first arrived, half of the four hundred thousand soldiers in his 8th Army were South Koreans, who were performing poorly, badly trained, and led by inexperienced officers. He was forced to disband some units. Drawing on lessons he learned in the Greek civil war, however, he soon focused on modernizing the South Korean army by conducting rigorous training, forming a command college, and reforming the Korean Military Academy. As their combat performance improved, Van Fleet pressed his superiors for a substantial expansion of the Korean military. Unlike other American commanders, he also formed an exceptionally close relationship with President Rhee, even encouraging his commitment to the complete defeat of North Korea. Ultimately, however, Van Fleet was ill served by his past success as an empowered man on the spot in Greece. He proved incapable of adapting to Korea's constraints as a limited war within a larger global conflict. He chafed as a cog in a command hierarchy, continuing to insist on a total victory over the communists up until the time he returned home in February 1953.⁴⁸

From July 1951 to July 1953, armistice talks proceeded fitfully while inconclusive fighting flared periodically along the 38th parallel, with continuing casualties on both sides. Though there were no more major offensives, artillery barrages remained intense to the very end, with the UN forces unleashing a firestorm of 7.7 million shells in the last four months of war, compared to the communists' 854,000.^{[49](#)}

The main barrier to peace was political, since both Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung insisted that the fighting should continue until Korea was fully unified under their control. By mid-1953, Rhee's resistance to any peace agreement had become so obstructive that President Eisenhower asked Van Fleet, recently retired, to return to Seoul as ambassador to persuade him to give way. But the general, believing anything less than total victory "would surrender the initiative to worldwide communism," flatly refused to assist the peace process.^{[50](#)}

In the last months of talks, the key sticking point proved to be the enormous numbers of prisoners of war (POWs), as many of the North Koreans and Chinese captives refused to return to their homelands. On the eve of armistice, Rhee assured the issue would prove even more complicated by releasing twenty-five thousand North Korean POWs, in effect offering them the option of staying in the South. In the end, India, formally neutral in the Cold War, finally broke the deadlock by suggesting the creation of an independent commission under its leadership, which resolved the issue. On July 27, 1953, Chinese and UN commanders signed an armistice ending the war. Determined to conquer the North, President Rhee refused to accept the agreement, though he promised to cooperate with its implementation. From retirement, Van Fleet blasted a "shameful peace . . . amounting to a surrender."^{[51](#)}

By the time that armistice was signed, the Korean War had become one of modern history's most devastating conflicts—with almost all of Korea's cities destroyed and more than three million of its inhabitants dead. While the US had sent 30 percent of its active-duty soldiers there and suffered 36,000 combat deaths, China committed 70 percent of its army to Korea and lost an estimated 420,000 to 900,000 troops killed or missing. Korea, of course, suffered the most, with 1 million military deaths and about 2.5 million civilians killed.^{[52](#)}

Although the massive US bombing had failed to achieve its strategic objectives, the Air Force command emerged from the Korean War

convinced that “resolute strategic bombing was decisive” and “embraced the efficacy of a relentless atomic offensive” as the way to win future Cold War conflicts. Accepting those claims about airpower, President Eisenhower would, for the rest of his term, allocate half of the defense budget to expanding the Air Force’s strategic capacity for nuclear strikes on the Soviet Union.⁵³

Not only did the Korean War intensify anti-communism at home, but it also served to militarize the Cold War abroad. The US defense budget grew nearly fourfold by 1953. In Europe, the mobilization of British, French, and Dutch troops for the UN command in Korea quickly transformed NATO into an explicitly military alliance. In 1955, after four years of divisive debate intensified by the Korean conflict, NATO decided to admit West Germany and allow it to establish a 500,000-man army.⁵⁴ In Asia, China had, through its combat in Korea, emerged as a world power for the first time in a century, leading the US, in the war’s immediate aftermath, to negotiate five bilateral mutual defense pacts with allies along the Pacific littoral.

As for that would-be man on the spot General Van Fleet, he had retired to Florida. There, he devoted himself to business ventures and far-right causes, notably the group Ten Million Americans Mobilizing for Justice, which tried to prevent the Senate from censuring Senator Joseph McCarthy after he accused the Army, the State Department, and the Democratic Party of communist treason. Although alienated from his own country’s Cold War strategy, Van Fleet identified strongly with South Korea under Rhee’s autocratic rule, serving as president of the Korea Society and sponsoring a cattle ranch in that country—a venture that brought him to my grandfather’s Florida ranch to buy breeding bulls, telling our family in his kindly manner, “Koreans need protein.”⁵⁵

SOUTH KOREA AFTER THE WAR

The Korean War’s most lasting legacy was the permanent division of the peninsula into rival communist and capitalist states. In the decades since the fighting ended, that division has been frozen in amber, thereby highlighting the serious long-term consequences of these surrogate wars for the societies that served as Cold War battlegrounds.

After three years of intense combat, Washington had won an ambiguous ally in South Korea. Through military occupation and then war, Syngman Rhee had become a dictator whose authoritarian rule would be marked by corruption and brutality. After his inauguration in 1948, Rhee detained suspected communists, required three hundred thousand leftists to attend reeducation programs, and slaughtered thirty thousand dissidents on Cheju Island alone.⁵⁶ As opposition to his rule rose in 1952, Rhee proposed a constitutional amendment to permit his direct election, rounded up legislators until they agreed, and then won with a crushing 75 percent of the vote. Despite Rhee's blatant intimidation and manipulation, Washington remained silent.⁵⁷

After he won reelection in March 1960, running unopposed, and students who protested the travesty were shot, the country erupted in riots. That April, amid ongoing violence, a CIA aircraft whisked Rhee, now eighty-five and ready for retirement, to a safe exile in Hawaii as demonstrators were converging on the Blue House, South Korea's presidential palace. After fifteen years of his authoritarian rule backed by lavish US aid, the South Korea that he left behind was still an underdeveloped agricultural nation with widespread poverty.⁵⁸

AFTER SYNGMAN RHEE

After Rhee's flight into exile, that unplanned version of regime change presented a major challenge to American foreign policy. In 1960, the democratically elected Chang Myon, both pro-American and politically weak, came to power. After persuading the commanders of the US 8th Army not to interfere, General Park Chung Hee led a military junta in a May 1961 coup that seized power. Only six months after overthrowing a democratic government, General Park enjoyed an amicable Oval Office visit with President John F. Kennedy, who reciprocated by giving the junta over \$400 million in economic aid. Simultaneously, the CIA helped establish the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), with fifty thousand agents and employees that acted, said one retired US diplomat, as "the ubiquitously feared core of control over all political activity within Korea." After two years of military rule marred by KCIA corruption and poor economic performance, General Park resigned his military

commission and ran for president, winning by a narrow margin in the October 1963 elections.⁵⁹

When the Vietnam War started in 1965, President Park resolved any doubts Washington still had about his dictatorship by sending forty-eight thousand Korean soldiers to fight there. Behind the facade of this anticommunist alliance, he extracted about \$4 billion in concessions that he used to capitalize South Korea's rapid transformation into an industrial economy, sparking accelerated growth by *chaebol* conglomerates like Hyundai, LG, and Samsung. While the regime provided capital and tax cuts for corporate growth, it banned labor unions and refused to permit a minimum wage.⁶⁰

With the US firmly on his side, Park felt free to impose a heavy-handed dictatorship in 1971, jailing political opponents like the future Nobel Prize-winner Kim Dae-jung. In August 1973, the KCIA kidnapped Kim in Japan, planning to kill him, but US ambassador Philip Habib intervened. So instead of assassination, he was jailed for a decade and then exiled. After a brutal crackdown on student protests in October 1979, however, Park was shot dead by the chief of the KCIA during a drinking party. Almost immediately, the military seized power, perpetuating its repressive rule until 1987 when police killed a student activist during a torture session, sparking protests that cascaded into South Korea's massive "June Uprising." As a million people flooded the streets and stood fast against tear gas barrages, the military regime was forced to release political prisoners and agree to open elections. Two years after the Cold War ended, South Korea finally elected its first truly democratic president, the veteran opposition activist Kim Young Sam.⁶¹

At the close of the Cold War in 1991, the Security Council admitted both North and South Korea to the UN, ending the dispute that had sparked the Korean War forty years earlier. Of equal import, South Korea consolidated its democracy in 1998 with the election of Kim Dae-jung, who devoted himself to healing the wounds of war by reducing tensions with the North. In retrospect, the Korean and Vietnam conflicts ensured the US would remain complicit in the Korean military's suppression of democracy until the very end of the Cold War.⁶²

SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS

Not only did the Korean War produce a permanent partition of the peninsula, but it also introduced tensions in the Sino-Soviet alliance that would, within a decade, lead to its collapse. After twelve years of war and civil war (1937–49) that required massive reconstruction, China's expenditures for the Korean conflict—amounting to about 40 percent of its budget for three years—crippled its economic development, making the new regime dependent on Soviet aid and willing to adopt extreme measures for rapid economic growth. After Stalin's death in March 1953 and the Korean armistice five months later, the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev presided over a massive aid program for China. But suspicions lingered from Stalin's era, and Mao bluntly rejected Khrushchev's suggestion, during a 1954 visit, that Beijing join the Comecon economic bloc, suspecting that Moscow might try to exploit China's economy.⁶³

Although Moscow was willing to provide considerable aid to develop China's strategic industries, Khrushchev refused to help Beijing build its own atomic bomb, insisting the country was safe under the Soviet nuclear umbrella. Simultaneously, however, Moscow demanded the joint development of uranium mines that Soviet scientists had discovered in southwest China, producing a decidedly negative reaction in Beijing. "Not only are we going to have more airplanes and artillery, but also the atomic bomb," Mao insisted. "In today's world, if we don't want to be bullied, we have to have this thing."⁶⁴

Complicating matters further, Moscow proposed measures to incorporate China's coastal waters into its own East Asian security system, much as the US was then doing with its Asian allies. In April 1958, the Soviet defense minister wrote Marshal Peng Dehuai proposing the joint construction of a radio communications station linking their navies, while the Soviet ambassador suggested a joint submarine fleet. In response, Mao condemned Russian chauvinism, saying: "To you the Soviets are first-class whereas the Chinese are among the inferior who are dumb, careless."⁶⁵ Consequently, Mao decided to seek economic independence by accelerating the country's development through the "Great Leap Forward," a crash program under China's Second Five-Year Plan (1958–62) that soon became an unimaginable human disaster. By the time the program ended in 1962, an estimated thirty million people had died of starvation in history's largest recorded famine.⁶⁶ As the disaster developed, returning Russian experts

circulated stories that the Great Leap Forward was causing economic “chaos,” angering Chinese officials sensitive to Soviet criticisms.⁶⁷

With surprising speed, the dispute went public when Beijing published articles accusing Khrushchev of betraying Lenin. Raising tensions further, the Soviets reciprocated by condemning China’s foreign policy during a gathering of communist parties at Budapest in June 1960. A month later, Moscow recalled some 1,400 Soviet experts from China, ending Sino-Soviet cooperation. In late 1962, China formally severed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, suspecting Moscow both of siding with India in a developing border dispute between the two countries and of colluding with Washington to check China’s nuclear ambitions via a nuclear test ban treaty.⁶⁸

In October 1964, China successfully tested a nuclear weapon at the Lop Nur site, marking its arrival as a significant military player on the world stage and a major global power. In the context of the Cold War, only superpowers were nuclear-armed, and other nations had to shelter under their atomic umbrellas.

Despite such military gains, Mao spent the last ten years of his rule, 1966 to 1976, presiding over the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” against imagined bourgeois infiltration of his society. The Cultural Revolution plunged China into utter turmoil—closing universities, purging millions of officials, sending ten million urban youths to the countryside, paralyzing economic development, and forcing the country’s withdrawal from international relations. As children turned on parents and students denounced teachers, the Red Guards, chanting slogans from Mao’s *Little Red Book*, herded millions of elders into public spaces where they were denounced, beaten, and humiliated before being taken away for incarceration or even execution.⁶⁹

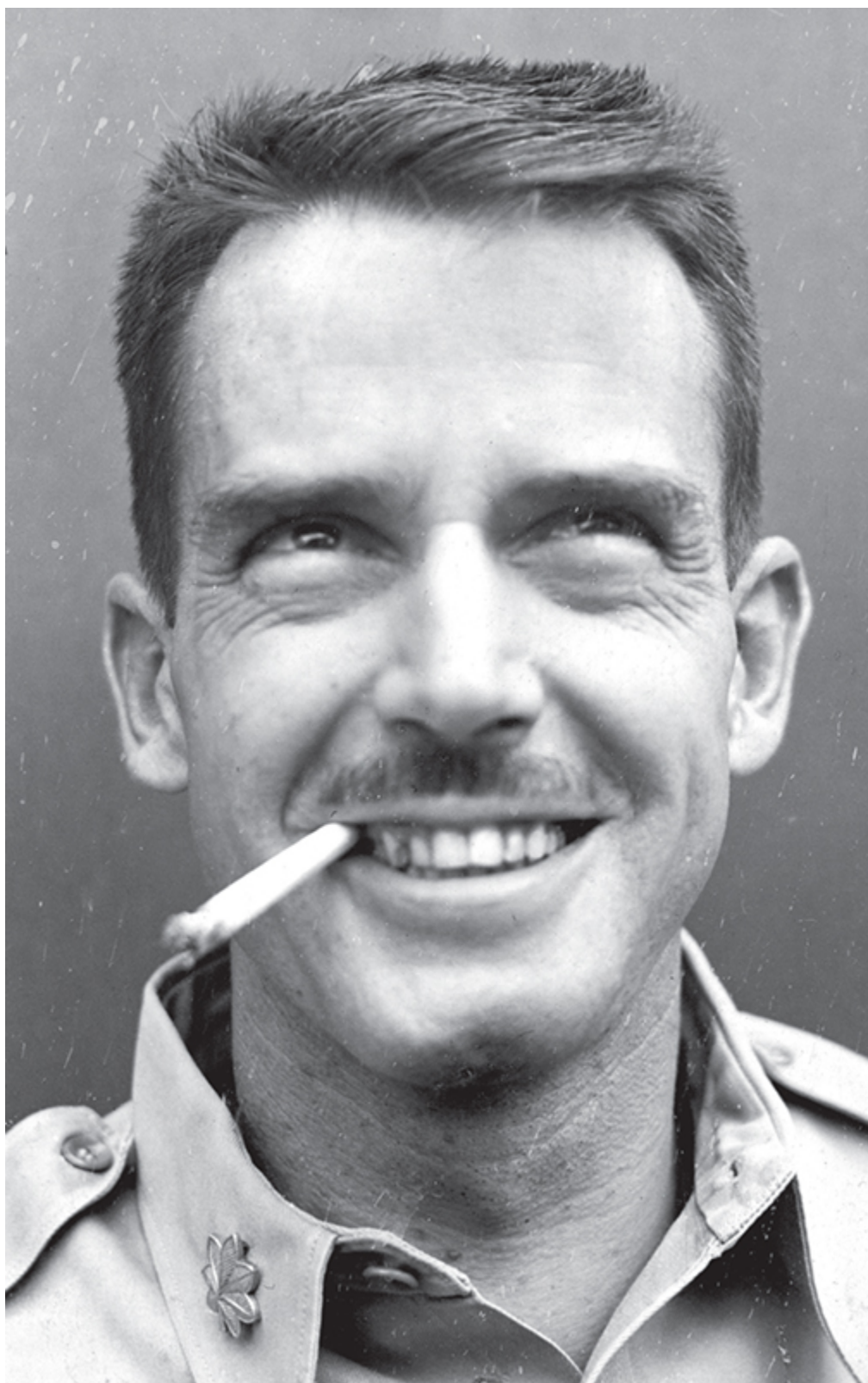
By the time Mao died in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping took power two years later, China’s retreat into ideological frenzy had cost it a decade of development, a loss of diplomatic influence, and nearly three million deaths.⁷⁰ To repair the damage from Mao’s chimeric quest for perpetual revolution, during the 1980s China opted out of the Cold War’s last decade and instead focused on rebuilding the country’s economic and military strength.

THE LEGACY OF THE KOREAN WAR

In retrospect, Washington's Cold War strategy required that South Korea remain a front-line state in the containment of communism, with a decidedly negative impact on its development as a democracy. Simultaneously, however, the US security umbrella, along with access to the American market, also allowed that country to become one of the world's most dynamic economies.

Beyond its impact on the peninsula, the Korean conflict also significantly affected the conduct of the Cold War. "The Korean War was a turning point for American diplomacy," argued historian Ronald Steel. "It stimulated a sense of alarm in Europe that led directly to the rearmament of Germany and to a vast expansion of American military power all over the world." In ideological terms, Steele argued, the Korean conflict "transformed the vague rhetoric of the Truman doctrine into a blueprint for interventions against communism"—setting a pattern for surrogate warfare that would persist until the end of the Cold War.⁷¹ Indeed, during the four decades following the Korean War, both Moscow and Washington would engage in similar proxy wars that inflicted death and devastation on Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Central America, and southern Africa. Moreover, just as Washington abetted authoritarian rule in South Korea, so alliances with its other client states would foster similar right-wing dictatorships worldwide—in Brazil, Congo, Chile, Iran, and Central America.

If we take a still broader view, the communist victory in China not only expanded the Cold War into a global contest, but also deepened the conflict's impact on individual Asian nations struggling against the vestiges of colonial rule. Inspired and sometimes aided by China, anti-imperialist agitation intensified across much of Asia—in Indonesia, Malaya, the Philippines, and Vietnam. To contain China, the US would form a chain of alliances along the Pacific littoral from Japan to Australia, while the Western powers would launch major counterinsurgency campaigns across Southeast Asia, producing some early successes and one devastating defeat. In sum, the Korean War brought the Cold War to Asia, starting a quarter-century of armed conflict, with much destruction and millions of deaths, particularly in Southeast Asia.



Major Edward G. Lansdale, Manila, Philippines, ca. 1946. (Credit: Edward Geary Lansdale Papers, Box 116, Hoover Institution Library & Archives)

CHAPTER 5

FIGHTING COMMUNISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In April 1954, some fifty thousand Vietnamese revolutionary troops were in the midst of attacking a French military outpost at Dien Bien Phu in the remote highlands of northern Vietnam, held back only by French artillery barrages and aerial bombardment. After two months of intense combat that captured the world's attention, the Vietnamese were only weeks away from a historic victory that would liberate their country from a century of colonial rule.

At the White House in Washington, a reporter for the Copley Press news organization asked President Dwight Eisenhower to comment on “the strategic importance of Indo-China to the free world.” Citing what he called the “falling domino principle,” the president said that, after the first in a “row of dominoes” falls, “we come to the possible sequence of events, the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the [Malay] Peninsula, and Indonesia.” Such a “geographical position,” he continued, would effectively transform “the so-called island defensive chain of Japan, Formosa, of the Philippines . . . to threaten Australia and New Zealand.” In its economic impact, such a development would “[take] away . . . that region that Japan must have as a trading area” and push it toward Communist China “in order to live.” Summing up, Eisenhower warned that the loss of French Indochina to the communists would be “just incalculable to the free world.”¹

Eisenhower was, in fact, visibly obsessed with the geopolitics of the Cold War and remarkably oblivious to the nationalist aspirations driving Vietnam's anti-colonial revolt. Nor was he alone. During the early years of the Cold War, Washington's myopic inability to distinguish between communism and anti-colonialism first evidenced itself in Southeast Asia.

While armed revolts in the Philippines and Malaysia were indeed driven by communist movements, those in Indonesia and Vietnam were clearly nationalist struggles against colonial rule. Caught in such political crosscurrents, Southeast Asia would become a testing ground for both communist insurgency and Western experiments in counterinsurgency—a clash that made that region the most volatile place on the planet during the first decade of the Cold War.

The origins of the sudden eruption of armed insurgency in Southeast Asia can be traced to long-standing European colonial policies. By the early twentieth century, Southeast Asia had become, after three centuries of European rule, the crown jewel in a diadem of colonies that girded the globe's tropical latitudes. Divided among nine colonies and one independent kingdom, the region's eighty million people produced over half the world's natural rubber, much of its cane sugar, and ample supplies of oil and minerals. Prosperity for the colonials meant adversity for the "natives." The rapid socioeconomic change brought on by high colonialism after 1870 would prove disruptive of village life, producing landlessness, mass migration, and rapid urbanization. While colonial firms reaped record profits, several areas suffered from serious overpopulation, particularly the Tonkin Delta of northern Vietnam and the Indonesian island of Java, where impoverished rice-producing villages became veritable seedbeds of revolution.

Sensing that seething ferment, Moscow made Southeast Asia, along with China, its primary arena for challenging European capitalism by attacking its vulnerable colonial periphery. After World War I, the Soviet Union had established the Communist International, or Comintern, and dispatched undercover cadre such as Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh to form fledgling socialist parties. Challenged by a mix of messianic, nationalist, and communist revolts during the 1930s, colonial states suppressed those uprisings and, by the end of the decade, seemed to have secured the imperial order.

But the Japanese invasion of the region during World War II soon ruptured those colonial controls and prepared the way for a postwar eruption of communist insurgency that would threaten Malaya's rubber industry, a major source of dollar revenues for Britain; the stability of the Philippines, which hosted US military bases; and the very survival of French Indochina, a strategic barrier against Chinese communist expansion.

Moreover, European counterinsurgency campaigns in Southeast Asia served to protect the South China Sea's shipping lanes that carried oil from the Persian Gulf through the Straits of Malacca to fuel Japanese industry. Adding to the region's strategic significance, after 1951 a chain of US military bases along the Pacific littoral from Japan to the Philippines became the westernmost frontier for Washington's defense of North America. Starting in the late 1940s, therefore, Western powers launched successful counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaya and the Philippines that became models for later efforts worldwide.

This tempestuous transition from colonialism to independence, and from European empire to US hegemony, allowed ample opportunity for the emergence of the Cold War's most famous, and notorious, men on the spot. Amid this geopolitical rupture, Western covert operatives played outsized roles in the region's history, equaled only by the influence of similar clandestine actors in Africa's later decolonization, which was also protracted and bitterly contested. A French officer deployed to Indochina would develop innovative tactics that shaped counterinsurgency strategy in other Cold War battlegrounds, while his Dutch counterpart became internationally infamous for his extraordinary cruelties in fighting the Indonesian revolution. All were ruthless, a few were cunning, and one—a CIA operative sent to Manila and Saigon—was so successful he became a legend in his own time, celebrated in film and fiction.

THE EMERGENCE OF INDONESIA

During World War II, the Japanese occupation of Indonesia disrupted centuries of Dutch colonial rule, unleashing strong nationalist aspirations for independence. Although the British occupied the archipelago for a year at war's end and tried to restore Dutch dominion, the social pressure for change would not be denied. Amid a rising tempo of violence, there would be a flurry of organizing among Indonesian nationalists long suppressed by the Dutch colonial police. The nationalist movement's charismatic leader, Sukarno, had gained unprecedented influence during Japan's wartime occupation but, tainted by this collaboration, had to work behind the scenes in the immediate postwar period. With him thus sidelined, less prominent leaders Sutan Sjahrir and Amir Sjarifuddin formed a new cabinet that tried

to guide the infant Indonesian Republic through the twin threats of partisan rivalry and colonial repression.²



While national leaders were maneuvering in the capital, a social revolution erupted in rural Java and on the island of Sumatra that shook the foundations of what was left of Dutch colonial rule. By mobilizing the militia that the Japanese had armed and trained, the new Indonesian Republic quickly formed an army of 350,000 regular soldiers and 470,000 local militia. Many of them were poorly armed, but Abdul Haris Nasution, drawing on his wartime training with both the Dutch and Japanese armies, formed the Siliwangi Division into an elite unit. By the time the British occupation forces withdrew in July 1946, the revolution had become a storm sweeping Indonesia's main islands.³

Between the British withdrawal in 1946 and the ultimate Dutch defeat in 1949, Indonesia's national revolution experienced three years of betrayal, bloodshed, and civil war. After the British turned the territory over to Dutch troops, the republic, still weak, was forced to negotiate with the acting Dutch governor-general, Hubertus van Mook. As an old Indies hand with a deep knowledge of the colony's culture, he played upon the archipelago's diverse demography (eighty million people divided into hundreds of ethnic

groups) to pursue a deft divide-and-rule strategy. He soon formed a decentralized federal state, the United States of Indonesia, with three main components—the Great Eastern State, the State of Borneo, and the Indonesia Republic, which was still confined to parts of Java and Sumatra.⁴ With the Dutch controlling the eastern half of the country, the struggle over Indonesia's future would be fought largely on the archipelago's two main islands, Java and Sumatra.

When Sutan Sjahrir's government seemed ready to compromise with the Dutch in mid-1946, the republic came close to civil war. With the republic's army and cabinet seemingly poised for bloodshed in central Java, Sukarno emerged as a mediator and restored unity. But the republic was still unable to defeat the Dutch outright and therefore agreed that November to join the United States of Indonesia as one of three autonomous states.⁵ Simultaneously, the colonial military launched a brutal counterinsurgency campaign in the Dutch-controlled parts of Indonesia, exemplified by the tactics of Captain Raymond "the Turk" Westerling. An expatriate born in Istanbul in 1919, Westerling had trained as a commando with the Free Dutch Forces during World War II and now became their man on the spot in postwar Indonesia.⁶

After landing at the city of Medan in north Sumatra in September 1945, Westerling served with the British occupation forces before forming a commando unit of five hundred Dutch and Indonesian troops. Operating autonomously without artillery, air cover, or superior officers for nearly a year, Westerling's squad still managed to subdue northern Sumatra through a mix of burnings, night raids, and targeted assassinations exemplified by the fate of a rebel leader named Terakan. "We planted a stake in the middle of the village and on it we impaled the head of Terakan," Westerling wrote in his memoir. "Beneath it we nailed a polite warning to the members of his band that if they persisted in their evildoing, their heads would join his own. . . . Its effect was magical." As he later explained: "In the East it is not the execution itself which impresses. . . . It is the method of execution."⁷

When republican rebels became active in southern villages of Sulawesi Island in late 1946, threatening Dutch control over the eastern half of the archipelago, Governor van Mook ordered that all "remnants of discord, degradation and terror" be eliminated. After an accelerated promotion to captain, Westerling then led a squad of 120 D.S.T. (Depot Speciale Troepen) commandos in an aggressive three-month campaign that slaughtered some

1,500 Indonesians. Starting in the city of Makassar on Sulawesi's south coast, which, he said, was "a kingdom of cutthroats," he became "pitiless" in his efforts to purge nationalist spies from the city. Confronting one such spy at Makassar's colonial club, Westerling recalled: "I drew my revolver and shot him through the head where he sat." In eleven forays into the countryside, his troops encircled villages at dawn, interrogated random captives to identify suspected rebels, and summarily executed, by his count, "six hundred terrorists" while losing "exactly three" of his own men—clear evidence of murder, not combat. In a dramatic reconstruction of this descent into calculated cruelty, the 2020 Dutch film *The East (De Oost)* shows the Westerling character calling individual villagers to come forward and shooting them point-blank in the skull again and again and again.⁸

In July 1947, the Dutch colonial army, which had grown to a hundred thousand troops, escalated its pacification efforts by launching a "first police action" to occupy Java's major ports and Sumatra's oil fields. In negotiations in January 1948, the republic recognized the line of that Dutch advance into central Java as the price of a lasting cease-fire. The Dutch, stung by international criticism of their actions and atrocities, had to agree. Among Indonesians, this concession was so controversial that Prime Minister Amir Sjarifuddin's government gave way to a new regime with the charismatic Sukarno as president and the statesman Mohammad Hatta as prime minister.⁹

With the republic's territory under Dutch blockade and hunger spreading, the densely populated island of Java erupted in civil war in 1948. After a hiatus following disastrous uprisings in the 1920s, the country's communist party, the P.K.I., quickly revived to build a mass following in central Java. Expanding its base of support rapidly amid the postwar misery, the communist P.K.I. made a desperate bid to seize control of the revolution from moderate nationalists. Deeming this development a threat to the republic, Colonel Nasution's elite Siliwangi Division drove the P.K.I. out of the royal city of Surakarta toward the town of Madiun, where party leaders retaliated by executing republican officials.¹⁰ After President Sukarno gave one of his spellbinding radio speeches denouncing the P.K.I. coup attempt at Madiun, the Siliwangi Division attacked, driving thousands of P.K.I. followers into the countryside, slaughtering many and later executing both the party's leader, Musso, and the republic's former prime minister, Amir Sjarifuddin, a covert communist. Watching from afar as Sukarno crushed

this communist revolt, Washington began to view the republic as a reliable anti-communist ally.¹¹

Only three months later, however, the Dutch army launched a “second police action,” seizing the republican capital at Yogyakarta while capturing Sukarno and most of his cabinet. Although a seemingly bold strike, it would soon prove a distinctly Pyrrhic victory. American diplomats denounced the Dutch at the UN and threatened to cut the Marshall Plan aid so vital to Holland’s postwar reconstruction. Forced to admit that their colonial rule was finally over, the Dutch negotiated with the republic’s prime minister, Mohammad Hatta, at The Hague in late 1949 and conceded independence conditional upon his acceptance of the United States of Indonesia as the country’s new form of government. By then, the Dutch had divided the entire Indonesian archipelago, including Java and Sumatra, into seven states and nine autonomous regions, many of the latter ruled by pro-Dutch Indonesian aristocrats.¹²

Although the Dutch transferred sovereignty to the United States of Indonesia in December 1949, a final act of violence soon destroyed this decentralized regime. Using the transition period from Dutch rule to resume his role as Amsterdam’s man on the spot, Turk Westerling attempted a coup to cripple the republic. After retiring from the Dutch army in November 1948, he had settled in west Java, where he ran a transport company and, posing as the messiah-like “Just Ruler” (Ratu Adil) of ancient Javanese prophecy, organized a militia called the Legion of Ratu Adil—quickly attracting twenty-two thousand recruits including some of his former commandos, Dutch veterans, and local villagers.¹³

After issuing an ultimatum demanding recognition of his militia as the official army of the Pasundan State in west Java, Westerling planned to seize the Dutch arsenal in the city of Bandung, assassinate the republic’s cabinet in the capital Jakarta, and install a new government under his political ally, Sultan Hamid II of western Borneo. On January 22, 1950, some five hundred men from Westerling’s militia attacked Bandung as planned, slaughtered a detachment from the Siliwangi Division, and occupied the city. But a Dutch officer who was not part of the plot stopped their seizure of weapons, while the republic’s army closed the roads into the capital, collapsing the coup. After hiding in Jakarta to avoid arrest, Westerling escaped to Singapore on a military aircraft with the help of senior Dutch officers.¹⁴

Amid heavy press coverage, he then returned to Amsterdam, where he spent the next seven years in misbegotten plots with Dutch neo-Nazis to seize eastern Indonesian islands roiled by secessionist revolts. One of the ships they were using proved unseaworthy, while the Dutch government seized another, and further attempts were hampered by the group's lack of funds (which some of them had embezzled). After a dismal debut as an opera singer, Westerling finally settled into life as an antiquarian bookseller, protected by a coterie of neofascists bound by his dark charisma. Although he later told the BBC television program *Panorama* that he had personally executed 350 Indonesians, Westerling was never prosecuted and finally died in 1987.¹⁵

Since Holland was a fading empire and could infuse its man on the spot with only the most limited power, the impact of Westerling's actions were at best ambiguous. His commando units did pacify North Sumatra and South Sulawesi, but did so with atrocities that degraded the legitimacy of the colonial state. His final coup, conducted with the complicity of Dutch officials, poisoned postcolonial relations with Indonesia and precipitated the rapid dissolution of the decentralized regime the Dutch had built with such painstaking determination.¹⁶ Viewed more broadly, Westerling's short, bloody career reveals the extraordinary ruthlessness of such men on the spot whose autonomy, in service to empire, allowed them to defy legal and moral restraints with impunity.

Despite their new nation's many problems, Indonesia's Western-educated elite had staged such a successful national revolution that they defeated both communism and colonialism—an experience that would inspire Sukarno, in collaboration with Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, to launch the Non-Aligned Movement in 1955 as a third way between the Cold War's two great powers. Yet his government's failure to address the problem of Java's mass poverty would lead, within a decade, to both a stunning communist revival and an ill-fated CIA covert intervention.

MALAYAN EMERGENCY

After a communist revolt erupted in Malaya, London launched a massive counterinsurgency effort since the colony's rubber exports were providing the largest single source of dollar earnings for Britain's postwar recovery. In

1948, communists among Malaya's large Chinese community formed the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) and started an armed struggle against British rule. Over the next twelve years, that revolt resulted in eleven thousand dead and \$850 million in economic damage before its defeat in 1960.¹⁷

When the British declared "a state of emergency" in June 1948, they had only nine thousand police and eight infantry battalions in the country to combat the communist guerrillas hardened by their wartime struggle against the Japanese.¹⁸ With strong support from five hundred thousand rural Chinese "squatters," who had evacuated to the countryside during World War II and were now farming there, the MRLA launched a guerrilla struggle that shot up road traffic, disrupted train travel, and killed British plantation managers. In October 1951, guerrillas ambushed and killed the British high commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, delivering a stunning blow that signaled the seriousness of the revolt.¹⁹

To salvage a desperate situation, in early 1952 the British turned to General Gerald Templer, who was, as his biographer wrote, "at heart an imperialist" in his politics and an intimidating "martinet in appearance and manner." As a professional military officer, he had learned about counterinsurgency during the brutal British suppression of the Palestine Arab revolt of the late 1930s. His subsequent career was a string of disappointments—including ordering his army division on an ill-advised attack in Italy during World War II; and, during the postwar occupation of Germany, firing the legendary German mayor of Cologne Konrad Adenauer for supposed incompetence—that left him desperate for success in this critical command. After Prime Minister Winston Churchill invested him with "absolute power—civil and military power," General Templer gained the autonomy to become London's man on the spot in Malaya.²⁰

Templer then proceeded to cripple the guerrillas by cutting off their food sources, including the Chinese squatters in the countryside. Between 1950 and 1952, he forcibly relocated about 450,000 rural Chinese to new villages surrounded by barbed wire and strict security. Meanwhile, British troops were defoliating the enemy's food plots in the jungles with herbicides. To add an element of terror, Templer ordered collective punishment of uncooperative civilians, organized "killer squads" for extrajudicial executions, and deployed tribal warriors to behead suspected guerrillas.²¹

With the Chinese fighters now increasingly isolated in Malaya's forests, the British began "rolling the map up" by marching northward along the narrow, 200-mile-wide peninsula toward Thailand. By 1953, they had an overwhelming 435,000 troops there to fight some 14,000 guerrillas. Within a year, Templer had made sufficient progress to recommend that he be replaced by his civilian deputy. He then returned home for a new round of personal reverses that included commanding the British Army during the 1956 Suez fiasco. In a career of disappointments, Templer enjoyed his one real success in Malaya, laying the foundations for victory and thereby keeping that lucrative colony inside the empire to help fund Britain's future military operations in Africa and the Middle East.²²

HUK REVOLT IN THE PHILIPPINES

While the communists were advancing relentlessly in China, Korea, and North Vietnam, Washington scored a signal success against the Huk communist guerrillas in the Philippines—producing a Cold War hero and a military doctrine that would inspire later US counterinsurgency campaigns. As communist revolts threatened to pull South Vietnam and the Philippines into the socialist bloc, CIA operative Edward Lansdale became Washington's man on the spot in both Manila and Saigon, placing his personal imprint on the country's foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

Born in Detroit in 1908 and educated at UCLA, where he dropped out after failing to pass the foreign-language requirement, Lansdale worked writing advertising copy in California before joining the Office of Strategic Services and spending most of World War II as an intelligence analyst in San Francisco. At war's end in September 1945, the army shipped him to the Philippines, where he spent two years as chief of intelligence for the Western Pacific command near Manila, training Filipino intelligence officers, coordinating presidential security, and observing local pacification efforts. Joining the US Air Force in 1947, he stayed on in Manila as a public information officer, cultivating an extraordinary network of elite contacts, as evidenced by the fifty-plus farewell notes he wrote to Filipino friends as he was leaving the country in late 1948.²³ Two years later, when the communist-led Huk peasant revolt threatened the capital city of Manila, Lansdale returned to the islands as a CIA operative, keeping his Air Force

rank for cover. Since the Agency had few officers with his expertise, the head of its covert-action arm, the Office of Policy Coordination, acceded to Lansdale's demands to lead his own six-person team free from oversight by the local CIA station, conceding him exceptional autonomy.²⁴ More broadly, the country's geopolitical transition from US colony to Cold War ally created postcolonial conditions that amplified his ambit for independent action.

Despite his inability to learn languages and thereby gain insight into foreign societies, Lansdale had other talents that would soon make him the most famous covert operative of his generation. He had an extraordinary ability to knit Americans and local leaders into effective covert-action teams and then claim credit for their work. His incessant search for allies also opened him to communist penetration—with few if any costs in Manila but with devastating consequences later in Saigon. His advertising experience also allowed him to create an illusory aura as a master of covert action, thereby cultivating influential patrons inside Washington's burgeoning Cold War bureaucracy who assured his rapid rise to the rank of major general in the Air Force, even though he couldn't fly an airplane and never saw combat during a career that coincided with four major wars.

The Philippine insurgency traced its origins to a breakdown in relations between landlords and their peasant sharecroppers in the rice fields of the vast Central Luzon Plain near Manila, producing a social conflict that slowly spiraled into armed revolt. By the 1930s, community organizers had formed a peasant labor union with two hundred thousand members in Central Luzon and were staging strikes, often in alliance with the Communist Party.²⁵ At the start of World War II, the Japanese invaded and the communists formed an anti-Japanese guerrilla force called the Huks, whose twelve thousand armed men controlled much of the region's countryside during the three years of enemy occupation.²⁶ When the US Army returned to Luzon for the liberation of Manila in 1945, however, its commanders refused to recognize the Huks as legitimate guerrillas and began disarming their units at gunpoint. After his election to the presidency of the republic in 1946, the conservative politician Manuel Roxas signed an agreement allowing the Americans to establish military bases at Subic Bay and Clark Field that would serve, throughout the Cold War, as anchors for the US defensive perimeter along the Pacific littoral.²⁷

As a landlord with large rice plantations in Central Luzon, President Roxas was hostile to the Huks and ordered the Philippines Constabulary, the national police, to crush their peasant unions and murder their popular leaders.²⁸ To survive the repression, the Huk command went underground, launching a revolt that would, over the span of eight years, go from stunning initial success to demoralizing defeat. In the revolt's first phase from 1947 to 1950, the Huk supremo Luis Taruc led the guerrillas in winning control of the Central Luzon countryside, advancing when government forces were absent and retreating when challenged. Against a force of eight thousand guerrillas and their fifty-four thousand civilian supporters, the ill-trained Philippines Constabulary deployed a mailed-fist strategy that only increased resistance. Using terror tactics, the Constabulary's elite Nenita Unit advanced into villages firing submachine guns and stacking corpses on the roadsides as a warning for passing peasants.²⁹ The Philippine Air Force added to the carnage through what US advisers deemed "excessive" strafing of the countryside—firing, for instance, forty-four thousand rounds during twenty-seven sorties against dissidents on just one day, September 9, 1950.³⁰

In April 1950, the US embassy reported that the Constabulary "has alienated the rural populace" and allowed the guerrillas to cover a "crescent of Huk-infested provinces around Manila," moving "about in that countryside . . . with apparently increasing ease." Demonstrating that report's accuracy, on August 26 several thousand Huk guerrillas attacked eleven towns across the Central Luzon Plain, capturing an army supply depot with a massive cache of arms, ammunition, and provisions.³¹ The situation was so critical that President Elpidio Quirino kept a power boat tied up outside the Malacañang Palace, gassed up and ready to speed across Manila Bay in case the Huks entered the capital.³² In a secret report, the US State Department concluded that the Constabulary had caused a "complete lack of confidence in the government," which could only be restored if the US forced President Quirino to "put men of integrity and ability at the head of his armed forces and give them the authority . . . to clean up the mess."³³

As part of its advisory effort, the Joint US Military Assistance Group, also known as JUSMAG, recommended placing the Constabulary under the Armed Forces and transferring most of their troops to the army. To pursue Huk squadrons through the jungles, JUSMAG advised splitting the army's unitary command into fifteen agile Battalion Combat Teams (BCTs), each

with 1,200 men, integral artillery, and light armor that would allow them to operate autonomously. By July 1950, half the ground forces had formed ten BCTs, with the Constabulary's murderous Nenita Unit now reformed as the 7th BCT.³⁴ While languishing behind a desk in Washington, Lansdale met Filipino congressman Ramon Magsaysay visiting from Manila and, in a move that launched Lansdale's counterinsurgency career, arranged a power lunch with top US officials at which the Filipino congressman spoke from the American's script. Impressed, the assistant secretary of state for the Far East flew to Manila in August to press President Quirino to pick Magsaysay as the country's defense secretary.³⁵

Appointed to that powerful position at this hour of crisis in September 1950, Magsaysay would prove uniquely qualified for the post. Tall, handsome, and charismatic, he had grown up in Zambales Province, at the northwestern corner of the Central Luzon Plain, affording him an intimate knowledge of that contested region. After high school graduation, he worked as a bus mechanic and, during the Japanese occupation, commanded the largest guerrilla force in his home province. Backed by guerrilla veterans, Magsaysay then won election to Congress and soon attracted notice through his legislative leadership on security issues.³⁶ As defense secretary, he asked JUSMAG for expert advisers in psychological warfare and intelligence—and Washington assigned Captain Charles Bohannon of the US Army and Colonel Edward Lansdale from the CIA.³⁷ As Lansdale later told a reporter, Magsaysay “lived in my house as his operational base,” and there “I hosted informal meetings of staff and combat officers wherein enlightened social programs of the Philippine Armed Forces were born.”³⁸

Their campaign's first break came that October when the Philippine Army captured the entire Communist Party Politburo inside Manila, simultaneously raising government morale and having an unexpected impact on the Huks.³⁹ Since many of those captured had supported communist leader Luis Taruc's supple guerrilla strategy, their removal allowed hard-line ideologues led by Dr. Jesus Lava to take control of the revolt, dismiss Taruc, and aim to “seize power within two years” by sheer force of arms—a strategy quite similar to an equally disastrous decision by the Greek Communist Party in 1948.⁴⁰

Simultaneously, the US National Security Council (NSC), citing the country's critical geopolitical position, decided to increase military aid to

\$117 million. “The Philippines,” read NSC document 84/2 dated November 1950, “are an essential part of the Asian off-shore island chain of bases on which the strategic position of the United States in the Far East depends. The threat of further communist encroachment in . . . Southeast Asia renders it imperative that the security of the Philippines be assured.”⁴¹

Under Magsaysay, the Philippine Army used that increased aid to launch a counter-guerrilla campaign that began to beat the Huks. With the support from US military advisers, who praised his “forthright honesty, aggressiveness, and courage,” Magsaysay doubled the armed forces to fifty-three thousand troops while transforming the top-heavy conventional army into a light, more mobile force with twenty-six Battalion Combat Teams that could find and fight the Huk squadrons barrel to barrel. Through incessant impromptu field inspections of those battalions, Magsaysay summarily sacked incompetent reserve officers and promoted experienced regular ones, mainly graduates of the Philippine Military Academy’s first large class of 1940—thereby forging a coterie of talented combat commanders. Under their aggressive leadership, the tempo of Philippine operations intensified throughout 1951, peaking in September with 166 encounters that killed 279 Huks, captured 109, and forced the surrender of 2,558 more.⁴²

Advised by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Bohannon, a contrarian intelligence officer, Lansdale’s CIA team developed an innovative cultural form of psywar to demoralize the guerrillas. Born in 1914, Bohannon had spent his teenage years traveling the American West, working on archaeological digs, and starting a doctorate in anthropology at Harvard University until the war intervened and sent him to the Pacific. “I had fought for Filipino guerrillas during World War II,” he recalled, “and so understood things like vampires.” As Magsaysay’s adviser, he now deployed the islands’ animist superstitions to devise novel psywar tactics. Instead of using intelligence to ambush a guerrilla squad, which might simply strengthen their bonds in battle, the Lansdale team would pluck a straggler from a Huk patrol, puncture his throat with an ice pick to drain the blood, and then leave the corpse on the trail. As Bohannon explained, the Huk guerrillas would return to find a bloodless corpse with two punctures at the throat. Terrified by the possible presence of *asuang*—mythological bloodsuckers from the Filipino folk netherworld—individual fighters would slip away at night, deserting and demoralizing an entire Huk squadron. In

the years to come, Lansdale liked to recount such macabre cultural tactics in his lectures and memos for the RAND think tank, as if they had been his own creation. “I was the one who developed the use of superstitions here in the Philippines that Lansdale described in his RAND Corporation report,” Bohannon recalled. “I knew about this from both my study of Navajo and Philippine cultures.”⁴³

Through such cultural manipulations and his close alliance with Magsaysay, Lansdale gained a sense of mastery over the Philippines that transformed him from a military bureaucrat into an empowered man on the spot—a covert operative whose deft intrigues seemed capable, to CIA officials in Washington, of bending any society to his will, whether in the Philippines, Vietnam, or Cuba.

Years later, in an interview just a few months before his death, Bohannon would recall an incident illustrative of that sense of mastery. As an intelligence officer, Lansdale learned that operational plans submitted to the office of the president were leaking to the Huks, compromising the Philippine Army’s combat capability. To catch the culprit, Lansdale left spurious military planning documents lying around Malacañang Palace ready for theft, thereby discovering that the communist agent was a woman reporter named Pat Yapcinco Kelly. “She was a Taruc courier and spy inside Malacañan,” Bohannon recalled. “Lansdale caught her, confronted her, and turned her into a double agent.”⁴⁴

He also courted her, starting a long, adulterous affair. His wife Helen, living in Washington, was middle-aged, dour, domestic, and raising their children, while Pat in Manila was fourteen years younger, lithe, lively, and ready for adventure. In their frequent forays into the Huk heartland, Pat escorted Lansdale in several attempts to meet the Huk guerrilla leader Luis Taruc, including one where “Taruc had gone out of the back window just as [Lansdale] had come in the front door,” and the communist bodyguards just let the American officer walk away. Although she accompanied him on his next CIA mission to the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon, she would stay behind when he returned to Washington.⁴⁵ “You would enjoy meeting a remarkable Filipino gal named Pat Kelly,” Lansdale later told a Pentagon boss, the former deputy defense secretary, en route to Asia, “who is the unsung heroine of the Huk campaign (under fire with me in both the Philippines and Vietnam); she has a great wit and political savvy.” Years later, after Helen’s death, the retired CIA operative and the former

communist married and settled in Virginia. It was this second Mrs. Lansdale who would bury the famed anti-communist fighter at Arlington National Cemetery in 1987 and later be buried there beside him.⁴⁶

Lansdale's biographers lend credibility to Bohannon's story about Pat Kelly's communist ties. "Now one of the things I have never told anybody," Lansdale admitted to his authorized biographer Cecil Currey. "Pat showed me a lot of the backcountry the Huks went through and she doesn't know that I knew she was . . . helping them out from time to time, just being fellow townsmates, sympathetic towards them . . . and carrying messages." Currey also quoted Pat Kelly herself explaining that she had attended the same high school as communist commander Luis Taruc, who married "a friend of mine" and later "carried on a war correspondence with me" that helped her work as a reporter. Indeed, Lansdale's most recent biographer, Scott Anderson, notes that Kelly's articles in Manila's *Advocate* newspaper "sometimes quoted the fugitive Taruc, suggesting the two had some covert means of communication."⁴⁷ Whether Bohannon was right to brand her a communist spy or Lansdale more correct to describe her as a communist courier, both seem to agree on one word for Pat Kelly: communist.

Realizing the Filipino peasantry was bitterly disappointed by the country's electoral violence, Magsaysay mobilized ROTC cadets to protect ballot boxes during the 1951 congressional elections. To support him, Lansdale funneled CIA funding to a citizens' poll-watching body, the National Movement for Free Elections.⁴⁸ As this and similar reforms weakened the Huk revolt in 1953, Magsaysay resigned his defense post to accept the presidential nomination of the Nacionalista Party. With Colonel Lansdale secretly supervising his campaign—delivering \$1 million in CIA cash to him and raising another \$250,000 from interested US corporations—Magsaysay would change the face of Philippine politics.⁴⁹ Instead of meeting with landlords in the big houses surrounding the town plazas, Magsaysay donned an everyman's open Barong Tagalog shirt and plunged into the barrios, shaking hands and taking his campaign directly to the people. In his speeches, he promised land reform and rural development, in effect stealing the key promises of the Huk revolt.⁵⁰

Faced with the threat of electoral fraud from the incumbent administration, Lansdale advised both the embassy and Washington that the government faced the "nightmare" of "a Magsaysay-inspired *coup d'état*" should he lose the vote. In a clear reference to the Battalion Combat Team

commanders, Lansdale reported that the threat of “armed revolt against a Quirino government elected this November is real,” involving “the cream of combat commanders of the AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines].” On the eve of the Philippine elections, the CIA’s weekly intelligence digest for the White House reported, as fact, that Magsaysay was plotting a coup. But Lansdale’s understanding of the Philippine military was less than magisterial. Unbeknownst to him, well over half the battalion commanders, that “cream” crucial for any coup, were Philippine Military Academy classmates who had agreed privately to oppose any extralegal action that would damage their democracy—a well-kept secret only discovered years later in interviews with those Filipino classmates. As it happened, no coup attempt was necessary. In the November 1953 balloting, Magsaysay won such a resounding victory that the coup was not needed, leaving Lansdale oblivious about his error.⁵¹

Over the next three years, President Magsaysay kept many of his promises by delivering a series of development projects to the countryside, effectively ending the Huk revolt.⁵² By May 1954, US military advisers reported there were only 1,400 armed Huks remaining and, within a year, found the guerrillas “no longer constitute a threat to the stability of the Government.”⁵³

Through a mix of political manipulation, sexual conquest, and simple obliviousness, Lansdale had gained an illusory sense of empowerment in the Philippines that would infuse his leadership of later CIA covert wars in Vietnam and Cuba. Celebrated in fiction and two Hollywood feature films, *The Quiet American* and *The Ugly American*, Lansdale became an almost legendary figure whose clandestine triumphs in Southeast Asia contributed to the mystique of covert operations, making them Washington’s main means of force projection for much of the Cold War. Immediately following his Philippine triumph, moreover, the CIA director sent Lansdale to Saigon hoping that such a skilled operative could work his magic to save yet another Southeast Asian nation from communism. If Lansdale’s much-celebrated Philippine success was largely the work of talented colleagues Bohannon and Magsaysay, his immersion in this four-year counterinsurgency campaign had honed his covert-action acumen in ways that would soon be evident in South Vietnam.

VIETNAM'S REVOLUTION

From Washington's perspective, Vietnam's communist revolution was complicated by its commingling with anti-colonial nationalism. Indeed, on September 2, 1945, only two weeks after Indonesian nationalists had declared their independence in Jakarta, Vietnam's new leader Ho Chi Minh, a dedicated communist, stood before a crowd in Hanoi to proclaim the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In the nine years of revolutionary warfare that followed, Ho and his communist cadre turned that proclamation into political reality by defeating the French and winning independence for the northern half of Vietnam.

Determined to reclaim Vietnam at the end of World War II, French prime minister Charles de Gaulle's government had dispatched troops and appointed a new high commissioner of Indochina, Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, a former Carmelite monk. Soon after his arrival in Saigon, the admiral established a new colonial government for the southern third of the country that the French called Cochin China, with an Advisory Council comprising eight Vietnamese and four French. In effect, this was the start of a French divide-and-rule strategy strikingly similar to Dutch maneuvers in Indonesia.⁵⁴ As French reinforcements arrived, Ho Chi Minh's would-be capital, Hanoi, soon became a battleground where house-to-house fighting raged. By January 1947, French troops captured Hanoi and Ho had retreated back into the northern mountains, where he was to remain for the next eight years.⁵⁵

With their re-occupation of the country complete, the French turned to Vietnam's Emperor Bao Dai to legitimate the client state they were forming to counter the appeal of Ho's Democratic Republic. After much pressure, the playboy emperor agreed to serve as president of the new State of Vietnam and signed the Elysée Accords in March 1949, incorporating Cochin China into a supposedly unified Vietnam and accepting French military protection for that quasi-independent nation.⁵⁶

In April 1950, Ho Chi Minh met Mao Zedong in Beijing and concluded a military aid agreement with China, which was now closely allied with the Soviet Union. After substantial Chinese arms shipments arrived in its highland liberated zone, Ho's expanded army launched an offensive that destroyed French fortifications along the eastern half of the China-Vietnam border—producing horrific casualties that made it one of the great disasters in French military history. At that hour of crisis, a leading French general,

Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, took command and quickly decided to create a Vietnamese National Army to lend legitimacy to this new state. By the time the French left in 1954, the skilled Franco-Vietnamese commander of that force, General Nguyen Van Vinh, had formed a complete institutional infrastructure for it and trained about 350,000 troops—the basis for South Vietnam’s army during the later Vietnam War.

To secure the northern villages from communist infiltration, General de Lattre, reflecting his military generation’s defensive mindset, also ordered the construction of the “de Lattre Line”—a horseshoe-like ring of 1,200 concrete blockhouses arcing from sea to sea around the capital city of Hanoi and the surrounding plain known as the Tonkin Delta. In 1951, Ho and his military chief, General Vo Nguyen Giap, made a near-disastrous decision to commit their forces to a frontal assault on the Tonkin Delta. Instead of breaking through French defenses, the Vietnamese troops were stalled on the de Lattre line just long enough for the French to blast them with superior firepower, inflicting heavy casualties.

During this period, French intelligence was building a resilient covert apparatus through three resourceful men on the spot. With the Third Republic’s military budget constrained by post–World War II financial problems, these operatives had fiscal autonomy from both Paris’s dictates and later American pressures. The first, Colonel Maurice Belleux, was the long-serving Indochina chief of the French secret service, SDECE (Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage), who graduated from St. Cyr military academy in 1931 and served as an aviator before moving into intelligence. Although his highly technical agency emphasized signals intelligence, intercepting 80 percent of communist communications, he also had the societal skills to fund his covert apparatus by knitting the illicit opium trade, from the mountains of Tonkin to the streets of Saigon, into what he called “Operation X”—creating a full convergence with the covert netherworld.^{[57](#)}

In southern Vietnam, Colonel Antoine Savani assured the city of Saigon’s security through the Binh Xuyen bandits, former river pirates who funded their operations by selling opium from Operation X through thousands of illicit outlets. After graduating from military academy in 1932, Savani was assigned to Indochina in 1938 and, during the Indochina War, became the intelligence chief in Saigon, where his Corsican heritage and fluency in Vietnamese made him master of the city’s netherworld. At the

war's start in 1948, Savani, almost alone, had met the head of the region's river pirates, Bay Vien, in what he called "a hut, in an open rice field, carefully guarded," for a two-hour encounter that persuaded the bandit boss to break with the communists and bring his thousand-man militia into Saigon. Appointed colonel in the Garde du Vietnam-Sud, Bay Vien was soon master of the city—securing its streets from communist terror attacks, seizing control of its vice trades (brothels, casinos, and opium dens), and bribing the head of state, Emperor Bao Dai, to appoint his deputy as chief of the National Police. As it grew into a force of nine thousand soldiers, the Binh Xuyen bandits became one of a dozen such militia—most of them associated with syncretic religious sects—whose forty thousand troops Colonel Savani funded to secure much of the crucial Mekong Delta.⁵⁸

Just as Savani mobilized religious militia to harry the communists in the south, so Major Roger Trinquier, head of the GCMA commandos (Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés), formed an effective counter-guerrilla force among highland minorities in the north. Born into a poor farming family in the French Alps in 1908, Trinquier was educated in a one-room village school. After graduating from officer training into the French Marines in 1931, he was assigned to a highland outpost in northern Vietnam, chasing opium smugglers on the China border and learning local languages to survive. In 1951, after nearly twenty years' service in Asia, he joined and later commanded the GCMA commandos, a force that General de Lattre had formed to pursue the communist Viet Minh guerrillas behind their own lines. By inserting paratroopers into highland villages to make contact with likely supporters, Trinquier slowly built a network of twenty thousand tribal fighters along the mountain spine of Indochina, making him, by war's end, the master of a full third of the colony's territory. To fund his extensive operations, Trinquier ran his part of Operation X by purchasing opium from hill tribe farmers in northern Laos and using DC-3 air transports to deliver regular 800-kilogram shipments to "a secret airfield near Cap-Saint-Jacques reserved for commando training," where they were trucked to the Binh Xuyen bandits in nearby Saigon. Through such complex covert operations, Trinquier became a renowned strategist whose writings would later influence US tactics during the Vietnam War.⁵⁹

In 1953, after three years of bloody and inconclusive warfare, the communist commander, General Giap, forged a winning strategy of feint and thrust for his final offensive. Realizing that the French were committed

to the defense of Laos, he launched several feints toward its royal capital at Luang Prabang to draw the French forces into the hills of northwest Tonkin. To block future Viet Minh offensives, de Lattre's successor, General Henri Navarre, selected the highland valley of Dien Bien Phu as the site for a military bastion, thereby setting the stage for a world-historical battle.⁶⁰ Located about 200 miles west of Hanoi and 10 miles from the Laotian border, Dien Bien Phu had little inherent strategic importance but great geopolitical significance. Although the Iron Curtain was clearly drawn in both Eastern Europe and the Korean Peninsula, it was still unclear where its counterpart would fall in Southeast Asia—whether at the China-Vietnam border, farther south at the 17th parallel, or at the frontier between Cambodia and Thailand.

Determined to score a definitive victory, in late 1953 General Giap began marching fifty thousand troops into the ridges surrounding Dien Bien Phu, including six artillery regiments with 144 field guns. Instead of mass infantry assaults with hand-to-hand combat, the battle became an artillery duel to control the approaches to the outlying French strong points that protected their headquarters and airstrip. As the Vietnamese dug miles of zigzagging trenches to approach the French lines, their artillery fired constant barrages totaling 103,000 shells—each one carried across Tonkin's rugged ridges by a human chain of peasant bearers. When the first French outpost fell, their artillery commander, Colonel Charles Piroth, pressed a fragmentation grenade to his chest and pulled the pin.⁶¹ Clearly, Dien Bien Phu was doomed.

As that bastion trembled at the brink of defeat, President Dwight Eisenhower's National Security Council, meeting half a world away in Washington, decided against intervening to save the French.⁶² On the afternoon of May 7, 1954, the Vietnamese broke through the last French defenses and occupied their headquarters. In the two months of fighting, the French had lost ten thousand dead and wounded soldiers, while the Vietnamese suffered some twenty-three thousand casualties.⁶³

The next morning, as diplomats were sitting down at Geneva on the shores of a quiet Swiss lake to negotiate a peace settlement, the morning newspapers all carried the same dramatic headline, "Dien Bien Phu Est Tombé" (Dien Ben Phu Has Fallen)—marking one of the first times in the history of modern mechanized warfare that a colonized people had defeated a major European army.

Meeting at Geneva from May to July 1954, the major powers agreed to a treaty ending the Indochina War. But they did not resolve the Cold War's critical geopolitical question: Where would the Iron Curtain fall in Southeast Asia? After many weeks of wrangling, the diplomats agreed on a temporary two-year division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel until a plebiscite could be held to choose leaders for a unified nation.⁶⁴ After the Geneva Accords were signed, victorious Vietnamese troops marched into Hanoi, which became the capital of a communist country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In the South, by contrast, the French had left behind the components of a viable separatist state, including a Vietnamese National Army.⁶⁵

Although it had sent observers to Geneva, Washington was not a signatory to the peace agreement and was not pleased with the likely outcome of the plebiscite. As President Eisenhower put it, everyone assumed that “had an election been held, Ho Chi Minh would have been elected premier.”⁶⁶ To transform a temporary cease-fire line at the 17th parallel into a permanent frontier for anti-communist containment, Washington was willing to form a separate state in South Vietnam—thereby setting the stage for one of the most consequential CIA covert operations of the entire Cold War.

THE TRANSITION TO US HEGEMONY IN SOUTH VIETNAM

While the Geneva conference was creating conditions that would likely lead to communist control over the whole of Vietnam, CIA director Allen Dulles tried to avert such an outcome by sending Edward Lansdale to Saigon undercover as an assistant air attaché. Instead of detailed instructions, Allen's brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, told Lansdale simply: “I want you to do what you did in the Philippines”—a brief so broad that he had ample autonomy to become Washington's man on the spot in Saigon.⁶⁷ Adding to his autonomy was a key clause in the Geneva agreement that suspended the country's sovereignty for two years until that plebiscite could be held in 1956, thus making Vietnam a momentary void in the world system.

Landing at Saigon in May 1954 speaking neither French nor Vietnamese, Lansdale freely admitted that he was “awed by the complexity of this small country” and “knew nothing” about its new prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem. But he quickly decided Diem was an ideal anti-communist ally—a Vietnamese version of Lansdale’s former Filipino comrade, Ramon Magsaysay. Much as he had done with the Philippine defense secretary, Lansdale began building a close personal relationship with Diem through nightly meetings at the palace, while remaining blind to Diem’s autocratic instincts and limited leadership abilities. Born in 1901 into a family of court mandarins who were devout Catholics, Diem had little administrative experience and less knowledge of the country’s politics after spending the war years exiled inside Catholic monasteries in the US and Belgium. Emerging from an abbey in Bruges to accept the emperor’s appointment as prime minister in May 1954, Diem met the American ambassador in Paris, C. Douglas Dillon. After two hours of conversation with the new Vietnamese leader that was “vague, rambling, and even unintelligible,” this seasoned American official came away pessimistic about the “ridiculous prospect that this Yogi-like mystic could assume the charge he is apparently about to undertake.” Landing at Saigon right after the Geneva Accords were signed, Diem had few reliable allies apart from his four brothers and, as a Catholic in a largely Buddhist nation, limited means of winning any.⁶⁸

To maximize Diem’s chances of survival, Lansdale would have to defeat a formidable array of opponents—including a French military determined to preserve its postcolonial influence; the pro-French Binh Xuyen crime syndicate that ruled Saigon; a local US mission dubious about Diem; and, above all, senior officials in Washington who had real doubts about his leadership abilities. That Lansdale, still a lowly lieutenant colonel, would best them all and make his chosen protégé Washington’s Cold War ally was testimony to his own capacity for bureaucratic intrigue.⁶⁹

After his first weeks struggling to familiarize himself with an unfamiliar country, Lansdale became an adviser to the Vietnamese National Army’s psychological warfare unit. There, in his usual outgoing manner, he began recruiting local allies, including at least one double agent, the communist master spy Pham Xuan An, whose espionage would prove devastating for the US during the Vietnam War to come. After six months there, Lansdale joined a joint Franco-American program for training the Vietnamese army called TRIM (Training Relations and Instructions Mission) that allowed

him to monitor French moves, including their later attempts to assassinate him when the rivalry between his CIA team and French intelligence, headed by Colonel Savani, erupted in shooting and bombings.⁷⁰

Behind his ill-concealed cover as an assistant air force attaché, Lansdale was working covertly to counter French influence and build a political base for Diem in the army and among the armed religious sects in southern Vietnam. When the army's pro-French commander, General Nguyen Van Hinh, attempted a coup against Diem in late 1954, Lansdale defused the plot and thereby facilitated the general's recall to France—depriving Saigon of its most competent commander who would later, as a senior *général de division*, supervise the deployment of France's nuclear arsenal. Although the French command still set the Vietnamese army's pay and promotions, they soon agreed to share training with the US military and transfer “full control” over the army to Diem's government.⁷¹

With the Vietnamese army moving into Diem's ambit, Lansdale turned his attention to the sect militias, whose forty thousand troops remained French assets. In late 1954, Lansdale climbed the jungle slopes of a southern mountain into the guerrilla base of Trinh Minh The, the most charismatic commander of the Cao Dai religious sect, hoping to win his disciplined militia to Diem's side. As the two looked at each other, “speaking mutely with our eyes,” Lansdale “found myself liking him instinctively.” They would indeed form a deep bond that would stand the test of battles to come. In parallel moves, Diem offered a generous payment and cabinet post to the Cao Dai sect's chief of staff to integrate his forces into the Vietnamese army.⁷²

By March 1955, Lansdale's covert manipulations had won over key leaders of the Vietnam National Army and most of the sect militias too, leaving the French with just one reliable ally—the Binh Xuyen bandits, whose nine thousand armed men controlled Saigon's opium dens, gambling casinos, and brothels, giving it a financial base impervious to CIA fiscal manipulations. Adding to their power, the Binh Xuyen's deputy commander served simultaneously as the chief of the National Police, a position secured by paying Emperor Bao Dai, the country's official head of state, a bribe of \$1.25 million.⁷³

By then, however, President Eisenhower's special representative in Saigon, Lieutenant General J. Lawton Collins, had spent five months in-country and, through his interactions with Diem, come to share the critical

views of the French high commissioner, General Paul Ély. Both agreed that Diem was an autocrat unfit to resolve the rising tensions with the Buddhist sects. After a clash between the Binh Xuyen militia and the army on March 30 over Diem's attempt to wrest the National Police from syndicate control, General Ély advised Collins that they should work together to replace Diem "in order to save Vietnam for the free world."⁷⁴ Consequently, in early April, Collins cabled Washington, insisting that Diem was unfit for leadership and recommending that Emperor Bao Dai replace him. In response, Secretary of State Dulles suggested that the change would give an advantage to the Binh Xuyen bandits, whom he described as "a gang which exploits its privileges to protect vice on a vastly profitable scale and which exists by virtue of the backing of the [Emperor] Bao Dai and the French."⁷⁵ But Eisenhower sided with his wartime comrade General Collins, saying: "You can't send this fellow down here and have him work on it if his judgment is the way it is. We have to go along with it."⁷⁶

To heal that breach in the US mission, Collins was called back to Washington in April for consultations, in which he excoriated Diem's leadership, stating that he had "demonstrated such a marked inability to understand the political, economic and military problems associated with Viet-Nam" and "simply cannot get along with other capable men"—criticism that caused Secretary Dulles, on April 27, to cable US officials in Paris and Saigon to plan to replace Diem once Collins returned to Vietnam.⁷⁷ Within hours, however, Lansdale telegraphed Washington insisting that failure to support Diem "would cause great damage to American prestige." Just a few hours later, fighting erupted in the streets of Saigon between the pro-French Binh Xuyen and the pro-Diem Vietnamese National Army.⁷⁸ As the combat intensified, Secretary Dulles, uncertain whether "Diem is losing control or possibly emerging a hero," cabled Paris and Saigon to rescind the messages he had sent just six hours earlier urging his replacement.⁷⁹

Starting on April 28, the Vietnamese army—supported by three thousand militia from the Cao Dai sect commanded by Lansdale's new ally Trinh Minh The—tried to push the Binh Xuyen bandits out of Saigon. With Lansdale advising Diem inside the presidential palace and Colonel Savani commanding the Binh Xuyen from their headquarters while his French officers led the bandit battalions, this surrogate war between rival secret services raged through five days of house-to-house combat. Complicating

Diem's chances, the French supported the Binh Xuyen with three lethal gunboats on the rivers surrounding Saigon and four hundred tanks that they positioned around the city to block any advance by Trinh Minh The's troops against the bandit militia. When the tide nonetheless turned against the French, they apparently decided to settle a score with Trinh Minh The for his earlier orchestration of terrorist bombings in downtown Saigon. As a bereaved Lansdale recalled, "a French sniper from the nearby French defense position" was likely the marksman who shot Trinh Minh The behind the ear.⁸⁰

In the end, the bandits were routed and Diem was left master of the city. Faced with such a dramatic change, Secretary Dulles reversed himself and cabled the Saigon embassy hailing Diem as a "popular hero" and a "symbol of Vietnamese nationalism" whose removal would be "highly detrimental to our prestige in Asia."⁸¹ In other words, in the face of overwhelming odds, Lansdale's protégé had become Washington's new surrogate in South Vietnam, while another of his less visible protégés, Pham Xuan An—recruited and promoted with the same reckless hubris—would soon become Hanoi's top spy in Saigon, with serious consequences for the later US war effort there.

In the months following the surprising victory over the French, Lansdale's relationship with Diem cooled, as the two had a fundamental disagreement over the country's future direction, whether toward democracy or autocracy. Lansdale advocated building popular support through democratic elections, but Diem and his brothers believed in crushing the communists while ruling through "benevolent authoritarianism." Consequently, in October 1955, Diem ran for president to replace Emperor Bao Dai as head of state and won with 98.2 percent of the vote, which a CIA analyst later said "was in no sense an accurate measure of his actual popular support." That mandate was soon followed by legislative elections that gave Diem a strikingly similar 98 percent of the seats in a new national assembly. Those rigged returns allowed him to abrogate the Geneva Accords and install himself as president of a separate state called the Republic of Vietnam. When Lansdale's tour ended just a few weeks later, the CIA moved quickly to curtail the autonomy that had allowed him to operate as a man on the spot. Henceforth, the chief of the CIA's Far East Division told his Saigon staff, "the era of free-wheeling

improvisation was over, and . . . the CIA in Saigon would begin operating like a normal station, with more emphasis on intelligence collection.”⁸²

As the representative of a rising global hegemon, Lansdale could mount a covert coup in Saigon that was infused with sufficient power to best his French counterpart Antoine Savani, a formidable antagonist who could mobilize clandestine assets built up during a decade of counter-guerrilla warfare. In the end, Lansdale, despite his ignorance of local conditions, won and Savani, despite his mastery of the city, lost—highlighting the way an empire’s trajectory could shape the fate of its man of the spot. Ultimately, the French and Dutch operatives in Vietnam and Indonesia, representing fading European empires, were decisively defeated. Yet Lansdale’s covert maneuvers, successful in the short term, invested Washington’s prestige in a problematic leader whose manifold failings—which were blindingly obvious to seasoned senior officials like General Collins and Ambassador Dillon—would later plunge the US into the quagmire of the Vietnam War.

THE COMMUNIST THREAT IN INDONESIA

Just three years after Lansdale secured Saigon, however tentatively for the West, Washington tried to contain communist gains in Indonesia through an abortive CIA intervention meant to split that sprawling archipelago into several separate states. By the late 1950s, the Indonesian Communist Party, the PKI, had recovered from its searing defeat at Madiun and grown so rapidly that officials in Washington became sorely concerned. Determined to seal such a breach in its line of anti-communist containment in the Pacific, Washington launched a covert intervention that became one of the CIA’s greatest disasters.

From 1951 to 1957, PKI chairman D. N. Aidit revived his party with a legal electoral strategy, recruiting over a million new members and playing parliamentary politics so successfully that it became the largest communist party outside the Iron Curtain. With deeply religious Muslim parties forming a powerful rival bloc in parliament, Sukarno formed a tactical alliance with the PKI on the basis of their shared secularism, thereby fueling the communists’ rapid expansion. Although sensible, maybe even necessary in a multiparty parliament, that alliance would have fateful consequences in the context of the Cold War.

While Sukarno struggled politically at home, in April 1955 he carried off a foreign policy coup by hosting a conference for twenty-nine new nations, representing half of humanity, in the city of Bandung. There, India's Prime Minister Nehru called the pressure to pick a side in the Cold War's bipolar division "humiliating to any self-respecting people," thus launching his leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement.⁸³ Just five months later in September, the PKI showed its growing political strength by placing fourth among the twenty-eight main parties in Indonesia's parliamentary elections. By mobilizing miserably poor peasants on the main island of Java, the communists performed surprisingly well against the Muslim Masyumi party, which had received a million dollars in secret CIA funding.

The double shock of the Bandung conference and the PKI's strong electoral showing prompted Frank Wisner, the head of CIA covert operations, to argue, in September 1956, that "it's time we held Sukarno's feet to the fire"—at the very moment when such a fire was indeed starting in the archipelago's outer islands.⁸⁴ As a new nation facing problems of political integration, Indonesia's unity was threatened when, after the 1955 elections, regional military commanders realized that Java's huge population would politically dominate those outer islands. In December 1956, two Indonesian army commanders on Sumatra Island formed a regional council to defy Jakarta's authority, inspiring a parallel move three months later on Sulawesi Island, where local officers formed the Permesta council to claim regional autonomy.⁸⁵

Underestimating the new nation's underlying unity, the Eisenhower administration's Ad Hoc Committee on Indonesia recommended, in September 1957, employing "all feasible covert means" to use the outer islands as political leverage against Sukarno. After successful recent CIA coups in Iran and Guatemala, Washington apparently assumed that the Agency could readily effect a similar regime change in Indonesia. That November, the CIA started shipping arms to the Sumatra rebels via airplanes and submarines. Sailing from Subic Bay in the Philippines in January 1958, CIA officer John Mason escorted a large shipment of infantry weapons aboard a submarine and accompanying military freighter to the port of Padang on Sumatra's west coast. On the basis of such early contacts, CIA director Allen Dulles sent the president a top-secret memo on January 31 that, confusing hope with reality, stated the rebels had the advantage in the civil war, not only on the outer islands but on Java as well. On February

10, Sumatra's military rebels demanded that their island's most prominent politician, Mohammad Hatta, who had recently resigned as Indonesia's vice president, be appointed to form a cabinet free from communist influence.⁸⁶

When Jakarta did not meet their ultimatum, the rebels on Sumatra and Sulawesi declared the formation of the separatist Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia. On February 11, 1958, Secretary of State Dulles signaled his support by stating, "We would like to see in Indonesia a government which is constitutional." Referring to Sukarno's recent tactical alliance with the communists, Dulles told Congress that he feared his government "would end up to be Communist despotism." Simultaneously, the State Department advised that the US should "encourage discreetly the separation of Sumatra and other of the major outlying islands from the Republic."⁸⁷ Within weeks, a Navy task force—the aircraft carrier *Ticonderoga*, a heavy cruiser, two destroyers, and two Marine battalions—began arriving at Singapore, preparing to intervene should the Caltex oil refinery on Sumatra be threatened.

Deftly parrying this thrust, General Nasution, now head of the Indonesian armed forces, proved far more skilled as a strategist than his American antagonists had anticipated. To deny the US fleet any pretext for intervention, Nasution executed a difficult three-part maneuver with surprising speed. After a naval feint off the island's west coast distracted the rebels, Nasution's paratroopers seized an airfield near the Caltex refinery while Indonesian Marines steamed up a nearby river, scattering the rebels and securing that facility.⁸⁸

Despite that reverse, the White House persisted with its plans to promote a separate government. On April 12, CIA director Allen Dulles, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and the Joint Chiefs considered the "secession of Sumatra from the Indonesian Republic, with the U.S. . . . guaranteeing its independence." Two days later, Eisenhower suggested "a submarine or two to deal with the Djakarta Government's amphibious attack."⁸⁹

With General Nasution's forces capturing Padang on April 17, thereby crushing the Sumatran revolt, the CIA shifted its operations eastward to Sulawesi Island. By supplying the rebels there with eight or nine B-25 and B-26 bombers and a coterie of contracted American, Taiwanese, and Filipino pilots, the Agency ensured the rebels control of the skies over eastern Indonesia. With almost absolute air superiority, the Sulawesi rebels

bombed airbases, troop transports, and commercial shipping, while their ground forces captured the town of Parigi in Central Sulawesi on May 8.⁹⁰

Just ten days later, however, disaster struck when Allen Pope, an American pilot for the CIA's proprietary Civil Air Transport, was shot down during a bombing run over Ambon Island that had hit a church during Sunday services, killing "most of the congregation." Unfortunately, Pope was carrying military identification papers that quickly put the lie to US assertions that he was merely a "soldier of fortune."⁹¹ Suddenly, Washington retreated, ending its support for the rebels as the CIA hastily withdrew its aircraft from Sulawesi. Freed from incessant air attacks, Indonesian government forces captured the rebel capital at Manado in north Sulawesi on June 26, forcing the local rebels into the countryside, where the last of them would surrender three years later in 1961.⁹²

This failed intervention in Indonesia would prove portentous. Even though Washington had deployed a full range of covert and conventional forces, a skilled local commander had rendered them remarkably impotent. In this inept attempt to use its own air and amphibious assets to support local rebels, this Indonesian debacle would foreshadow the CIA's disastrous invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs three years later. Its lessons, however, were concealed by the CIA's operational secrecy and therefore lost on official Washington. In the debacle's aftermath, however, Washington began to realize that the Indonesian military was actually anti-communist and started cultivating its commanders with aid and training—a policy that would bear fruit just eight years later in October 1965 when the army organized the massacre of a million suspected communists.

THE AFTERMATH OF EMPIRE

In retrospect, those national revolutions in Indonesia and Vietnam show how much the transition from European colonial rule complicated Washington's conduct of the Cold War in Asia. In Indonesia, a determined Dutch attempt to suppress the independence movement only fostered an anti-colonial nationalism that would influence both the 1955 Bandung conference and the larger Non-Aligned Movement, creating serious challenges to Washington's global leadership. The underlying strength of

the country's national identity also preordained the CIA's later intervention in Indonesia's outer islands to utter failure.

In Vietnam, the spectacular communist victory in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 would inspire revolutionaries worldwide and roil US hegemony in Asia, Africa, and Latin America for decades to come. More immediately, the conflict between Vietnam's drive for national unity and Washington's attempt to draw the Cold War's geopolitical line of division at that country's 17th parallel would, within five years, mire the US in the demoralizing quagmire that became the Vietnam War.

By reducing the complex social forces driving insurgency in Southeast Asia to "communism," Washington condemned itself to a succession of avoidable foreign policy reverses—first, in the outer islands of Indonesia and later in the Vietnam War, eventually forcing it to cede the whole of Indochina to the communist bloc. Despite such serious setbacks, the successful counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaya, the Philippines, and, after 1965, Indonesia would achieve the West's key geopolitical goals in this contested region by keeping the strategic sea lanes through the Strait of Malacca open and preserving the massive US military presence in the Philippines.

Simultaneously, a similar imperial transition from British to US hegemony in the Middle East would create yet more foreign policy crises for the West and soon produce another man on the spot whose legendary triumphs would contribute, like Lansdale's, to the heroic aura of covert operations, making them Washington's weapon of choice for fighting the Cold War.



Former CIA official Kermit Roosevelt Jr. on safari, Kenya, 1960. (Credit: Terrence Spencer / Popperfoto, Getty Images)

CHAPTER 6

END OF EMPIRE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

On a gray Sunday afternoon in November 1956, some twenty thousand anti-war demonstrators filled Trafalgar Square in the heart of London, holding aloft banners reading “Law Not War.” On the eve of an impending invasion of Egypt, the crowd was protesting Britain’s misbegotten bid to seize the Suez Canal. “They have besmirched the name of Britain,” cried charismatic Labour Party leader Aneurin Bevan to wild applause. “They have made us ashamed of the things of which formerly we were proud. They have offended against every principle of decency and there is only one way in which they can even begin to restore their tarnished reputation and that is to get out! Get out! Get out!” Taking up the cry “Eden Must Go!,” the protesters poured down the broad Whitehall boulevard toward 10 Downing Street, where Prime Minister Anthony Eden’s cabinet was meeting. A phalanx of police, including mounted officers, beat back the crowd and broke up the march. But even as the ministers were debating whether to launch the invasion, the jeers and boos from a protest of unprecedented size and passion penetrated the cabinet room—an unsettling harbinger of how the Suez Crisis would soon precipitate the collapse of the British Empire in the Middle East and beyond.¹

The ending of European imperial rule over the Middle East coincided with the early years of the Cold War in ways that would make that tumultuous region the site of a dangerous superpower rivalry. During the conflict’s first decade after 1947, Eurasia’s geopolitical “zone of conflict” along the continent’s southern periphery witnessed a succession of regional wars—first in Greece, next in Korea, and then in Indochina, before settling into the Middle East, where four major wars between Egypt and Israel would be fought over a span of twenty-five years.²

In the Cold War's first years, the region seemed stable as the British maintained an imperium there, making it the strategic core of their shrinking global empire. But British dominion, challenged by both rising nationalism and expanding American hegemony, would soon be battered by political violence in Egypt, Iran, and Palestine. As oil replaced coal as the prime source of energy for America's world order, the Middle East, with the world largest petroleum reserves, became a volatile arena of geopolitical contestation. An early reflection of this development was the surge in Saudi Arabia's oil production from just 1,400 barrels per day in 1938 to 246,000 in 1947; by 1949, the Persian Gulf was already supplying 50 percent of Europe's demand for oil.³

THE COLONIAL CONTEXT

In the Middle East, as in much of the world, the Cold War was shaped by the convergence of decolonization with the superpower rivalry between Washington and Moscow. European imperialism had, after all, been a major force in shaping the region's modern history. In the era of high imperialism after 1870, the Middle East had achieved a tenuous political stability through a partition of its lands among five modern empires.

After purchasing a 44 percent share of the Suez Canal Corporation in 1875 from Egypt's bankrupt monarchy, Britain invaded the country in 1882—capturing Cairo, imposing an imperial protectorate, and, six years later, concluding an international convention to regulate access to the canal. Through its later conquest of neighboring Sudan and its protectorates along the Arabian coast from Aden to Kuwait, Britain secured the sea lanes between the Suez Canal and its massive oil refinery at Abadan in the Persian Gulf.⁴

Like other European empires, it drew colonial boundaries for geopolitical convenience, ignoring what the *New York Times* called the “extraordinarily complex tapestries of tribes and subtribes and clans” in the region. After the first stirrings of Arab nationalism during World War I, however, such boundaries would become a recurring source of internal strife and international conflict.⁵

Under a secret treaty signed during World War I, Britain and France agreed to a postwar partition of the Ottoman Empire, which had sided with

their enemy Imperial Germany. At war's end in 1918, the British fused three former Ottoman provinces into a protectorate that it called the Kingdom of Iraq and installed a made-up monarchy under an Arabian royal, Prince Faisal al-Hashemi. Just to its west, Britain also imposed protectorates over Palestine and Transjordan, which was ruled by Faisal's brother Abdullah.⁶

Angered by this renewed colonialism, Arab nationalism grew rapidly after World War I, manifesting itself in massive anti-British demonstrations in Egypt in 1919 that led to a limited independence three years later, an uprising against the British protectorate of Iraq in 1920 that left ten thousand dead, and a revolt against French rule in Syria and Lebanon in 1925 that cost six thousand lives. To placate the region's rising nationalism, the British negotiated the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 and the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, which confined British troops to the Canal Zone. They assumed these were sufficient concessions to preserve their imperial presence in the region.⁷

BRITAIN'S DECLINE / AMERICA'S ASCENT

Despite its careful planning, Britain's control of the Middle East would collapse with the Iranian coup of 1953 and the 1956 Suez Crisis, leaving Washington to become the region's dominant protector. Like so many Cold War flash points, the twin crises in Iran and Egypt were the product of an ongoing decolonization process that steadily accelerated in the postwar decades. Just six months after Japan's surrender in 1945 had ended World War II, an American diplomat, Philip Bagby, observed tellingly that "the great empires built up by the Western European powers during four centuries . . . are crumbling before our eyes."⁸

Like the other European powers, Britain struggled to adapt its vast formal and informal empire to a changing world. After India broke free in 1947, both the British Conservative and Labour parties spent the next decade trying to co-opt nationalist aspirations in order to protect their remaining imperial possessions.⁹

With the long, divisive debate over India's fate resolved, London cobbled together a three-part strategy for a sustainable postwar empire. First, it decided to consolidate smaller colonies into cost-effective

confederations like the Federation of Malaya, the Central African Federation, and the United Arab Emirates. Next, it planned to control their colonies' exports and so capture profits from Malaya's rubber, Ghana's cocoa, Uganda's coffee, Zambia's copper, and the Persian Gulf's oil, thereby bolstering the country's currency, the pound sterling. Finally, it clung to military enclaves critical for the imperial defense of the Suez Canal Zone and the Persian Gulf.¹⁰

All those careful plans notwithstanding, a succession of colonial crises erupted in Egypt, Kenya, Malaya, and Palestine that spurred a rapid imperial retreat and cut the population living under British imperial rule from seven hundred million in 1945 to just five million in 1965.¹¹ The hinge—the turning point in the transformation of the confident British Empire of the 1940s into the rapid decolonizing one of the 1960s—was the sudden collapse of its position in the Middle East during the mid-1950s.

At multiple levels, the Middle East became the geopolitical core, the center of gravity, for the compact postwar empire that Britain formed after the loss of India. In economic terms, the flow of oil from British-operated fields in the Persian Gulf provided 60 percent of the petroleum needed for its industrial economy. From military bases in the Suez Canal Zone and Iraq, Britain's huge force of heavy bombers served as its “prime means of deterrence,” ready to strike the industrial heartland of southern Russia should the Soviet Red Army attack British occupation forces in West Germany. To assure safe passage for its merchant ships, the Royal Navy maintained a security corridor from bases in Aden, Bahrain, Cyprus, and Suez to protect both the sea lanes to Southeast Asia and shipments of oil from the Persian Gulf. In terms of diplomacy, British leaders, both Conservative and Labour, saw the Middle East as their “greatest geostrategic asset,” allowing them to claim “co-leadership” of the Western alliance with Washington.¹² In the Cold War's first decade, Britain tried to maintain this informal empire through alliances with a set of traditional aristocrats—the king of Egypt, the shah of Iran, the king of Iraq, and a dozen Persian Gulf emirs from Kuwait to Oman.

BRITISH MIDDLE EAST, 1946





Through this seemingly supple strategy, Britain became the dominant power in the postwar Middle East, exercising formal and informal authority over a vast region extending from Iran in the east to Egypt in the west, from Cyprus in the north to Sudan in the south. The epicenter of this informal empire was Egypt, where Britain had massive armed forces inside the Suez Canal Zone, major business holdings in the capital city of Cairo, and a pliable client in King Farouk, whose government was filled with British advisers. With the region's largest metropolis, the world's leading Islamic university, and a population of twenty million crowded into the fertile Nile River valley, Egypt was the heart of the Middle East.

In marked contrast to its colonies in Africa and Asia, however, Britain did not rule this vast region and its ninety million people as a colonial power with formal sovereignty over most of its sixteen states. Like a large circus lion perched tenuously on a wobbly three-legged stool, the British presence rested on access to just three small enclaves through treaties that local sovereigns could readily revoke in an increasingly post-imperial age. First, on the north shore of the Persian Gulf, the massive Abadan oil refinery was a corporate enclave managed by two thousand British expatriates through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's 1933 concession agreement with Iran. Next, the British had a protectorate along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf based largely on an 1880 treaty with the seven Arab emirates that formed the Trucial States, the precursor of today's United Arab Emirates. Finally, the British operated the Suez Canal under the Constantinople Convention of 1888 and defended that waterway under a 1936 treaty with Egypt, which allowed it to base ten thousand troops inside what was known as the Canal Zone.

Oblivious to the region's rising nationalism, British Foreign Office experts felt that the Middle East's ethnic and sectarian leaders would agree that Britain was the natural power to lead them to modernity. Even the Labour Party's Prime Minister Clement Attlee told President Harry Truman and his secretary of state, Dean Acheson, in December 1950 that the British

“understood Asian nationalism and the Oriental mind far better than they did.”¹³ Through such imperial hubris, Britain failed to cultivate new elites beyond the region’s aristocrats—emirs, kings, and sheiks—whose collaboration and conservatism were the antithesis of emerging Arab nationalism. In the decades after World War II, that diffuse ideology of the region’s new elites became largely socialist, frequently secular, and pan-Arab in its aspirations as well as anti-imperialist and often anti-monarchical in its political aims.¹⁴

There was also a critical, even fatal factor shaping developments: Britain’s closest ally, the United States, was fast becoming its covert competitor in the region. As it was cooperating with the British in occupying Germany and building NATO, Washington was also competing for influence in the Middle East by using the CIA to promote Arab nationalism as a counterweight to both Soviet communism and British colonialism. Amid the transition from British to American hegemony, this secret sub-rosa rivalry for dominion over such a strategic region would create a momentary geopolitical rupture that allowed space for the rise of two extraordinary men on the spot—Kermit Roosevelt Jr. of the CIA and Norman Darbyshire of the British Secret Intelligence Service (a.k.a. MI6), whose collaboration-cum-competition would shape the fate of Iran.

In January 1952, the nationalist ferment in the Middle East exploded in exceptionally violent riots that burned the major symbols of Britain’s informal empire in Cairo—Shepherd’s Hotel, Barclays Bank, the Turf Club, and dozens of similarly symbolic buildings. Four months later, the US National Security Council noted “the rapid decline . . . in the ability of the U.K. to . . . defend Western interests,” particularly in Egypt. Simultaneously, the State Department reported a “deep-seated . . . hatred for the British and French because of their . . . colonial policies” in the Middle East and suggested that the US needed to “take more initiative . . . relative to the area.”¹⁵

THE CIA ALLIANCE WITH COLONEL NASSER

In the immediate aftermath of those Cairo riots, CIA assistant director Allen Dulles dispatched the head of his Near East division, Kermit Roosevelt Jr., on a mission known informally as “Project FF” (Project Fat Fuck)—an

unkind reference to Egypt's obese King Farouk, whose corrupt British client state required reform to check the rise of radical alternatives. Finding Farouk incapable of change, Roosevelt met privately with a secretive military group, the Free Officers, several times during his March 1952 visit, finding them bitterly opposed to the king, whom they blamed for their defeat in the 1948 war that followed Israel's founding. During those meetings, Roosevelt reportedly made contact with the group's driving force, Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, and may actually have encouraged him to launch a military coup as an alternative to the inept royalist regime (foreshadowing Roosevelt's later role as Washington's man on the spot in Tehran).¹⁶

That July, the Free Officers, led by Lieutenant Colonel Nasser and General Mohamed Naguib, stunned the "incompetent" Cairo office of the British MI6 intelligence service when they seized power and forced King Farouk to sail his yacht into exile, taking the country's gold reserve and British imperial influence with him. Born the son of a postal clerk in 1918, Lieutenant Colonel Nasser soon became the embodiment of Arab nationalism by opposing communism and advocating a vision of Pan-Arabism marked by an ingrained hostility to the new state of Israel.¹⁷

Just weeks after that coup, Kermit Roosevelt wrote approvingly of how the Free Officers had launched "a number of reform measures which began to raise the hopes of informed friends of Egypt"—including abolition of Farouk's *pasha* aristocracy, a "house cleaning" of the corrupt parliament, and much-needed land reform. Roosevelt added that Nasser "is the one man I have met who . . . possesses the capabilities to lead the Near East—not only Egypt but through Egypt her Arab friends and neighbors—out of the barren wilderness," by providing "inspiring leadership" for "a great Renaissance." After the military junta took power, moreover, US ambassador Jefferson Caffery worked effectively with General Mohamed Naguib, the regime's leader. Observing this emerging American-Egyptian entente, a British embassy official disparaged the Americans for "the underlying fixed . . . ideas which they have of us as 'imperialists' and oppressors of backward races, as distinct from themselves, whom they feel to be the liberators and uplifters of the oppressed."¹⁸

Indicating a growing US interest in the Middle East, in May 1953 Secretary of State John Foster Dulles came to Cairo for meetings with Nasser, now vice chair of the Revolutionary Command Council. Two

months later, Dulles joined the National Security Council in approving Directive 155/1, which stated that the administration hoped “to guide the revolutionary and nationalist pressures throughout the area into orderly channels not antagonistic to the West, rather than attempt to merely preserve the status quo”—a not-so-oblique swipe at the British position in the Middle East.¹⁹

During the four years that followed the 1952 Egyptian coup, British influence was fading fast while the CIA’s relationship with Nasser was entering its “honeymoon” period, as the Agency helped the Egyptian junta build a new national police school and trained Nasser’s security forces to protect him from assassination. Of equal import, the Agency provided broadcasting equipment for a powerful radio station, Voice of the Arabs—sending Nasser’s sonorous voice across the desert sands and thus realizing Kermit Roosevelt’s vision of him as a leader of all the Arabs.²⁰

Within just two years, Nasser had, with Washington’s support, consolidated his control over the country by banning the radical Islamic Brotherhood after it tried to assassinate him, arresting his ally General Naguib, and building a state apparatus strong enough to challenge the British. After months of talks with Nasser, the British agreed, in October 1954, to withdraw their seventy thousand troops from the Canal Zone by March 1956.²¹ “We seemed to be blissfully unaware,” said George Young, Middle East chief of MI6, “of the extent to which the Arabs had come to resent the physical presence of British troops, and how far the rulers . . . who were our close associates, had become discredited in the eyes of the younger generation.”²² Unable to reconcile their imperial illusions with the region’s rising nationalism, the British had no way stop their influence from ebbing—culminating, first, in the Iran coup of 1953 and then in the disastrous Suez Crisis of 1956.

THE FALL OF A DYNASTY

At the same time Britain was experiencing problems in Egypt, its position in Iran was being roiled by that country’s rising nationalism. As Iran gained in global importance at the start of the twentieth century, its Qajar dynasty, already in a state of decline, had proved poor stewards of the nation’s resources. In 1908, a British company, Anglo-Persian Oil, discovered a

major oil field in southern Iran. Four years later, Britain converted its warships from coal to oil, securing a reliable supply of that now-critical commodity by purchasing a controlling interest in the company for £2.2 million. Amid continuing political instability, in early 1921 Colonel Reza Khan rode into Tehran at the head of six hundred Persian Cossacks, conducting a bloodless coup and installing a new government with a civilian prime minister and himself as army chief. Four years later, Reza Khan deposed the last of the Qajar rulers and crowned himself Reza Shah Pahlavi. During the first years of his rule, he led an ambitious modernization campaign marked by fiscal reform, universal conscription, and a ban on women's veils.²³ Perhaps most importantly, in 1933 he negotiated a new "concession agreement" with Anglo-Persian Oil, which extended British rights for another sixty years in exchange for a reduction of the drilling area to one hundred thousand square miles and a fixed-price royalty per ton of oil—a deal that later became a bad bargain as retail prices soared.²⁴

By the time World War II started in 1939, the Western allies had good reason to fear Iranian collusion with Nazi Germany. Reflecting the Nazi belief in Aryan racial superiority, in 1935 Reza Shah had changed the country's name from Persia to Iran, which literally means the "land of Aryans."²⁵ Fearful of Reza Shah's affinity for the Axis alliance, in August 1941 two hundred thousand Russian and British troops invaded Iran, securing both the oil fields and supply lines for the Soviet Red Army, which was then fighting the Nazi invasion of Russia. When Reza Shah refused to cooperate, the British exiled him to the island of Mauritius and installed his son as the new shah. By war's end, oil production at the Anglo-Iranian Oil refinery at Abadan had more than doubled, making it the world's largest.²⁶

The Allied occupation also allowed increased Soviet influence, which manifested itself in the formation of Iranian trade unions and, in 1941, the creation of a local communist party, the Tudeh, which led that emerging labor movement. While the Tudeh party gained a mass following with Moscow's support, the more moderate National Front formed a liberal coalition led by veteran parliamentarian Mohammad Mosaddegh, a nationalist critical of the British presence.²⁷

With the end of the Allied occupation in 1945, domestic politics intensified, marked by riots at the Abadan oil refinery, demonstrations in Tehran, and, above all, rising opposition in the Majlis parliament to the

young shah's support for a renewed oil agreement with the British. By war's end, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) had become one of the world's seven major oil companies, providing lucrative employment for 2,700 British expatriates, 30 percent dividends for its shareholders, and 85 percent of the Royal Navy's fuel. Not only did the company pay Britain more in taxes than it paid Iran in oil royalties, but it was also a classic colonial firm with a rigid color bar that reserved senior management slots for the British.²⁸ From 1946 to 1952, the oil issue sparked a bitter confrontation between London and Tehran that soon made a young war veteran and fledgling spy, Norman Darbyshire, Britain's man on the spot in Iran.

Unlike most agents of the MI6 who learned foreign languages at Oxbridge, Norman Darbyshire was born poor in 1924 to a greengrocer in Wigan, an impoverished mill town in England's north. After joining the army at the start of World War II, he arrived in Iran in 1943 at the age of nineteen as an agent of the wartime Special Operations Executive, beginning a ten-year residence that made him fluent in Farsi and knowledgeable about the country's politics. After the war, he joined MI6 as a bagman for his Tehran housemate Robert Zaehner, an eccentric Oxford scholar who doubled as a spy, delivering bundles of pound notes in biscuit tins to influential Iranians and befriending the three Rashidian brothers, local businessmen who would prove key MI6 assets in Iran.²⁹

Postwar negotiations over a new oil agreement stretched out over two years. The British management of AIOC, convinced that Iranians could not run such complex operations on their own, stubbornly resisted the emerging global standard of 50-50 profit-sharing and insisted on fixed payments to preserve both its profits and the corporate taxes Britain needed for postwar reconstruction.³⁰ In 1950, the Majlis set up an Oil Committee, led by the aristocratic lawyer Mosaddegh, head of the National Front, to review the draft agreement with AIOC. During similar negotiations, the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) had granted Saudi Arabia a 50-50 split of oil revenues, killing any chance that Iran would accept AIOC's low fixed rates. In March, a pro-British prime minister, General Ali Razmara, was assassinated before he could fulfill his promise to pursue a similar 50-50 deal with AIOC. Within a day, Mosaddegh led the parliament's Oil Committee in a unanimous vote rejecting the fixed-rate agreement and recommending the nationalization of the oil industry.³¹

In the aftermath of a bitter general strike by fifty thousand oil workers that highlighted the harsh conditions at Anglo-Iranian Oil, the parliament chose Mosaddegh as prime minister. He quickly led the legislature in nationalizing the industry on May 1, 1951, while canceling British oil concessions due to expire in 1993 and transferring them to a new National Iranian Oil Company.³²

For the next two years, Britain would use its full panoply of power to try to reverse that nationalization. Nothing worked. Anglo-Iranian Oil closed the Abadan refinery, sabotaged the equipment, and evacuated all its skilled British employees. But the Iranians still managed to produce oil. Next, London sought American mediation. But Washington's envoy, Averell Harriman, found oil workers at the Abadan refinery living in "shocking" slums and concluded that the British had "a completely nineteenth-century colonial attitude toward Iran." Appealing to the UN in October, the British ambassador said AIOC's record in Iran "must arouse the greatest admiration." But Mosaddegh also appeared before that body and explained that, after producing 315 million tons of oil over forty years, Iran's refinery workers were "suffering in conditions of absolute misery." After Mosaddegh's UN visit, President Truman received him warmly in Washington, while Secretary of State Acheson disparaged the British negotiating strategy, saying: "Never had so few lost so much so stupidly in so short a time." Even *Time* magazine put Mosaddegh on its cover as its "Man of the Year." Turning to the courts, Britain sued Iran at The Hague to restore the concession agreement. But in June 1952, Mosaddegh, speaking in French with "great dignity and poise," argued that the International Court could not interfere with Iran's sovereign right to end the "humiliation" inflicted by a foreign corporation—a position the justices accepted. Finally, the British tried gunboat diplomacy, seizing tankers in the Persian Gulf carrying oil supposedly "stolen" from the Abadan refinery and imposing a naval blockade that cut Iran's oil exports nearly to zero in 1952. But Iran did not capitulate, not even to such crippling pressure.³³

As their diplomatic options failed, the British turned to covert machinations. At first, MI6 deployed Darbyshire's former housemate, the academic Robert Zaehner, to oust Mosaddegh by funneling "well over a million and half pounds" to bribe Majlis legislators. When that effort failed, the MI6 unit at the British embassy under Christopher "Monty" Woodhouse and his deputy Darbyshire began plotting a coup through the three

Rashidian brothers, who were already on a £10,000 monthly retainer.³⁴ Simultaneously, the MI6 branch used the Royal Air Force, flying from its airbase at Habbaniyah in neighboring Iraq, to deliver arms to tribal villages across Iran, emboldening the anti-Mosaddegh opposition. During this preparatory period, Darbyshire also recruited a pro-shah general, Fazlollah Zahedi, to lead a possible coup, since, as the MI6 operative later explained, “a coup is necessarily predicated on the use of armed force. Zahedi was suitable as a candidate because he had good standing. We knew the Shah trusted him.”³⁵

But on October 17, 1952, Iran closed the British embassy in Tehran and expelled all its officials, including the MI6 intelligence unit, which shifted its base to Cyprus, still a British colony. There, Norman Darbyshire took charge of Iran operations, continuing to fund the Rashidians and communicating with them by radio. Just before the embassy’s closure, the MI6 unit had drafted a plan for “mounting a coup,” which involved, said Darbyshire, “seizure of key points in the city by what units we thought were loyal to the Shah . . . , seizure of the radio station, etc. . . . the classical plan.” As he would recall years later, “We talked to the CIA, but they had cold feet very much more than we had . . . because it was quite clear that they didn’t have anything near like what we had on the ground” and “weren’t quite aware of the depth of organization the Rashidians had”—a gross underestimation of the CIA, which would soon beat the British at their own game.³⁶

Within days, however, Mosaddegh’s security forces uncovered a plot to depose him and ordered the arrest of the British assets, the Rashidian brothers and General Zahedi—making it amply clear to MI6 that it would need agents in-country if they were even to attempt a coup. To win the support of the CIA’s Tehran station, MI6 agents Monty Woodhouse and Samuel Falle flew to Washington where, on December 2, 1952, they met the incoming CIA director Allen Dulles and his covert-action chief, Frank Wisner. To persuade the Americans, Woodhouse was careful to emphasize the “Communist threat to Iran” and avoid any mention of “the need to recover control of the oil industry.” Proposing a classic two-phase coup scenario, Woodhouse said the main force would come from an “urban organization run by the [Rashidian] Brothers,” which included “senior officers of the army and police, deputies and senators, mullahs, merchants, newspaper editors, and . . . mob-leaders,” who would seize control of

Tehran and arrest Mosaddegh. In a parallel action, “tribal leaders were to make a show of force in the direction of major cities in the south.”³⁷

At about that time, Woodhouse and Darbyshire also met Kermit Roosevelt Jr., head of the CIA’s Near East Division, who was passing through London from Tehran and found himself favorably impressed with the detailed MI6 “battle plan” for the coup but recommended waiting until the Republican president-elect, Dwight Eisenhower, took office in January. Unbeknownst to the British, Roosevelt had been warning his CIA superiors repeatedly for months that the communist Tudeh party was “stronger . . . than generally assumed” and “Iran’s loss under ‘cold war’ conditions . . . is a strong possibility.” Even though the Agency’s analysts argued that the communist Tudeh was “certainly incapable . . . of overthrowing the government” and, as we now know from declassified Kremlin documents, Moscow actually had little interest “in encouraging a revolutionary adventure in Iran,” Roosevelt would remain a persistent and persuasive proponent of Mosaddegh’s overthrow.³⁸

WASHINGTON WARMS TO THE COUP

Although the outgoing Truman administration had resisted deposing a democratically elected government, the CIA station in Iran, unbeknownst to the British MI6 and much of official Washington, was already running what it called Operation BEDAMN, recruiting stay-behind networks of tribes in case of a Soviet invasion and working to counter the communist Tudeh party. In a March 1951 memo, the CIA proposed “to buy off” the country’s leading cleric, Ayatollah Seyid Abol Qasem Kashani, and the British MI6 soon detected the payments.³⁹

Upon taking office in early 1953, President Eisenhower initially seemed uninterested in an intervention in Iran. But the Dulles brothers—Secretary of State John Foster and CIA Director Allen—had worked for the New York law firm Sullivan & Cromwell that represented the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and so took office already concerned about the threat to Western interests there. To change the president’s position, CIA director Dulles addressed the National Security Council on March 4, warning that “the Communists might easily take over” Iran, which meant that the entire Middle East, with 60 percent of global oil reserves, “would fall under

Communist control.” To preempt such a dire prospect, the president concluded that, although “we certainly don’t want a break with the British,” it was “about time for the British to allow us to try our hand.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, coup planning continued in February 1953 when the MI6 operative Woodhouse met with senior CIA officials, proposing that Kermit Roosevelt should be the coup’s “field commander” and agreeing that General Zahedi should replace Mosaddegh. While Washington was still dithering in April, Darbyshire, operating from Cyprus, used the Rashidians to kidnap and kill General Mahmoud Afshartous, Iran’s national police chief and a Mosaddegh loyalist. Since that assassination subsequently allowed the appointment of police commanders sympathetic to the shah, it would prove critical to the coup’s success.⁴¹

By mid-April, Washington had overcome its reluctance and the CIA sent a message to MI6 in London confirming its participation—a commitment facilitated by Anglo-Iranian Oil Company’s begrudging agreement to give US companies 40 percent of the oil in a post-coup Iran.⁴² After Secretary of State Dulles approved the CIA coup on June 25, Washington informed its ambassador to Iran, Loy Henderson, and the chief of the CIA station in Tehran, Roger Goiran, of the plan to topple Mosaddegh. But Goiran had reservations about “putting U.S. support behind Anglo-French colonialism,” so he returned to Washington just two weeks before the coup. That small personnel change, combined with the larger geopolitical rupture caused by Britain’s retreat and America’s advance in the region, would allow Kermit Roosevelt Jr. the autonomy to become Washington’s man on the spot in Tehran.⁴³

Although Kermit Roosevelt Jr. had a famous name, he had grown up in genteel poverty that infused him with disarming charm and a diffident aristocratic manner masking a rather relentless hunger for wealth and power. Born in Buenos Aires in 1916, he grew up in Oyster Bay, New York, near the home of his grandfather, former president Theodore Roosevelt. That apparent path to success through family connections was, however, blocked by his father, Kermit Sr., who led a dissolute life—degrading the family name with tawdry affairs, destroying the family fortune during the Depression, and finally shooting himself in the head while serving with the army in Alaska. Unlike his father’s depressive, destructive persona, Kermit Jr. was an engaging man who readily attracted allies, whether for CIA coup plots or, later in life, multi-million-dollar arms deals. After graduating from

Harvard and teaching history to engineers at California Institute of Technology, he served in Egypt and Iran with the Office of Strategic Services during World War II. Joining the CIA in 1950, he first immersed himself in Egypt, where he gained experience in regime change that he would then apply to the CIA's Operation Ajax in Iran.⁴⁴

By July 1953, the CIA was funding almost daily demonstrations by anti-Mosaddegh forces in Tehran, but the shah was proving ambivalent about a coup, even one aimed at reinforcing his power. To overcome what the CIA termed the shah's "pathological fear of the 'hidden hand' of the British" and persuade him to sign the decrees that would legitimate Mosaddegh's overthrow, the Agency turned to his "forceful and scheming" twin sister, Princess Ashraf. After MI6 agent Norman Darbyshire and his CIA counterpart Stephen Meade met her in France and offered her a large bribe, the princess flew to Tehran on July 25 for an unproductive meeting with her brother.⁴⁵ Next, the CIA sent Norman Schwarzkopf Sr., who had served as police adviser in Iran during the 1940s, to extract a royal decree (*firman*) naming General Zahedi as army chief. But by August 1, the shah had still declined to sign—a refusal the CIA's official history of the coup attributed to his "entrenched attitude of vacillation and indecision."⁴⁶

With his intermediaries failing, Kermit Roosevelt decided to take matters in his own hands, cabling the CIA station in Tehran about "the desirability of having someone on the spot who could stiffen any characters who begin to waiver at the last minute." After flying to Beirut, he drove himself across the deserts of Syria and Iraq toward Iran, so excited to be following in the heroic footsteps of his grandfather Theodore Roosevelt that, he wrote, "my nerves tingled, my spirits soared." Crossing the border into Iran on July 19, Roosevelt recalled encountering a "semiliterate immigration-custom fellow" who did not question his fake passport reading "James Lochridge" or check the car's trunk holding \$100,000 in Iranian currency.⁴⁷

After CIA station chief Goiran left Tehran on August 2, Roosevelt's team made direct contact with General Zahedi, who was, according to the CIA history, "lacking in drive, energy, and concrete plans." So Roosevelt next turned to the shah. Meeting him at midnight in a black sedan parked in the palace driveway, Roosevelt, according to the Agency's history, "had a long and inconclusive session with the shah [who] stated that he was not an adventurer." The CIA officer replied that "failure to act could lead only to a Communist Iran." Finding the shah too timid and General Zahedi too

incompetent, Roosevelt had to rely on his chief local asset, the resourceful businessman Assadollah Rashidian, whom he had recruited for the CIA, unbeknownst to the British, during two earlier secret meetings in Tehran.⁴⁸

Once his bona fides were confirmed by codes in an Eisenhower speech and a BBC broadcast, Roosevelt had another meeting with the shah on August 8. According to the CIA history, the monarch would only agree “to give oral encouragement to selected army officers” and still insisted that “he would sign no papers.” By this time, the CIA’s psywar specialists had targeted Tehran’s religious leaders “by issuing black propaganda in the name of the Tudeh Party, threatening . . . savage punishment if they opposed Mossadeq” and reinforcing the point with “sham bombings of the houses of these leaders.”⁴⁹

As the psychological campaign “was reaching its climax” with the CIA-controlled press going “all out against Mossadeq,” Roosevelt had a final meeting on August 13 with a group of key Iranian colonels committed to the coup. He then cut all contact to conceal the US role (a decision that would soon prove a serious tactical error). That same day, Queen Soraya apparently persuaded the shah to sign the royal *firman* decrees making General Zahedi prime minister, which one of Roosevelt’s coup colonels had hand-carried to Tehran from the royal resort on the Caspian Sea.⁵⁰

FAILED FIRST COUP ATTEMPT

Although the shah’s decrees now legitimized the action, most of the Iranian coup colonels, according to the CIA history, “proved to be inept,” leading to a one-day delay until August 15, and giving Mosaddegh’s camp enough time to discover the plot. Adding a complicating factor, General Zahedi’s chief of staff “lost heart and went into hiding,” crippling the mobilization of pro-shah army units. Moreover, planned kidnappings of key pro-Mosaddegh figures went badly, and though Foreign Minister Hossein Fatemi was nabbed, the military’s chief of staff, General Taghi Riyahi, wasn’t. That oversight proved critical, for by 5:00 p.m. on August 15 General Riyahi had learned all the details of the coup plot from an officer loyal to Mosaddegh. By midnight, he had moved troops into countercoup positions around Tehran, preventing Zahedi’s men from proceeding with their plot. When the head of the Imperial Guard, General Nematollah

Nassiri, tried to deliver the royal decree to Mosaddegh ordering his dismissal, General Riyahi had him arrested.⁵¹

After “an anxious, sleepless night in their offices,” the CIA’s Tehran station staff awoke on August 16 expecting to celebrate an overnight regime change. Instead, they were stunned to discover that Mosaddegh was still in power, that his loyal troops still occupied the capital, and that Iranian radio was broadcasting news about a failed coup. Fearful of retribution, the shah fled to Baghdad on his private plane and then onward to Rome on a commercial flight. News of the abortive coup prompted Mosaddegh to stage a mass rally on August 16, producing an outpouring of popular support for his National Front and for the establishment of a republic.⁵²

By that afternoon, the American embassy had decided the coup was a lost cause. But Roosevelt insisted there was still a “slight remaining chance of success”—a view shared by his local partners, General Zahedi and the CIA’s key local assets, the Rashidian brothers.⁵³ Meanwhile, half a world away in Washington, CIA headquarters was awash in “depression and despair” over the coup’s failure and advised its Tehran station that “operations against Mossadeq should be discontinued.” Former CIA director Walter Bedell Smith, then at the State Department, cabled Kermit Roosevelt that he “should leave at the earliest moment.” But the British MI6 unit at Cyprus delayed delivery of the message, allowing Roosevelt to reply two days later rejecting the order puckishly with “love and kisses from all the team.” Meanwhile, he took the precaution of hiding General Zahedi and the Rashidian brothers, while the CIA station gave the local press photostatic copies of the shah’s decrees appointing General Zahedi as prime minister.⁵⁴

On the evening of August 17, Roosevelt convened a four-hour “council of war” at the embassy compound with General Zahedi, the Rashidian brothers, and one of the coup colonels to plot a new attempt set for August 19. As a first step, the coup group arranged for the Shi’a Muslim leader Ayatollah Borujerdi to issue a call for an anti-communist jihad while sending emissaries to persuade key Iranian officers “to declare for the Shah.”⁵⁵

As Roosevelt was plotting, the streets of Tehran came alive for two days of boisterous, often violent mass demonstrations. In the most volatile outburst, a fake Tudeh crowd, mobilized by the Rashidian brothers, was joined by real Tudeh members to form a mob that toppled statues of the

shah and his father, while Tudeh youths roamed the streets shouting “Death to the shah!” and “End the dynasty!” In other, more peaceful protests, Tudeh members marched to demand a “democratic republic”; on August 18, their leaders approached Prime Minister Mosaddegh asking for ten thousand rifles to defend him from an impending coup, a request he refused. In the aftermath of the violence, Roosevelt also arranged for US ambassador Loy Henderson to meet Mosaddegh and demand the reestablishment of public order. Surprisingly, Mosaddegh complied by mobilizing the city’s police, who were generally pro-shah, and issuing a decree banning demonstrations, effectively removing his own supporters from the streets.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, in Rome on that same day, the shah and Queen Soraya were checking into the luxurious Excelsior Hotel on the Via Veneto, where CIA director Allen Dulles and his wife also happened to be staying—a coincidence too extraordinary to be coincidental. Since Dulles had once hosted a dinner for the shah in New York, the two were well acquainted. Between private visits with the US ambassador to Rome, the playwright Clare Boothe Luce, Dulles may have used his charm to keep the shah stable between his shopping trips.⁵⁷

SUCCESSFUL SECOND COUP ATTEMPT

Just four days after the failure of his first coup attempt, Kermit Roosevelt staged a second successful one by using mobs, mullahs, and military officers. At dawn on August 19, the capital awoke to find facsimiles of the shah’s *firman* edict dismissing Mosaddegh displayed on the front pages of eight morning newspapers, a message amplified by the CIA’s distribution of a thousand printed copies. In preparation for the day’s events, the British MI6 released \$100,000 and the CIA station paid out \$50,000 to mobilize mobs that soon filled Tehran’s streets. Among those who received CIA payments was Ayatollah Kashani, who, said Darbyshire, “controlled some . . . tough boys . . . you could use as [a] street mob” from Tehran’s Zurkaneh wrestling gyms, “where they do all sorts of extraordinary athletic exercises with chains etc. to the chanting of the Koran.” Among the hundreds of such gyms in Tehran, the Rashidian brothers had ties to several through two well-known “racketeers”—Sha’aban “The Brainless” Jafari, who

“protected” the Shahpour Square vegetable market, and Teyeb Rezaei, who controlled the fruit market at Sultan Mosque Square. Moreover, MI6 paid a brothel keeper in south Tehran to mobilize mobs there. In a recurring synergy with the “covert netherworld” that marked the CIA’s Cold War operations, the coup would succeed this time by mobilizing Tehran’s criminals, who collected protection money from markets, brothels, and omnipresent opium dens.^{[58](#)}

At 9:00 a.m. that day, the Rashidians assembled these “Zurkhaneh giants” in Tehran’s main bazaar. Then, as Kermit Roosevelt recalled in his memoirs, “these huge figures started marching westward, shouting and twirling . . . like dervishes,” leading the mob in sacking the offices of four Tudeh newspapers and burning the offices of the *Bakhtar-e-Emruz*, the paper of Mosaddegh’s Foreign Minister Fatemi.^{[59](#)}

By 9:30, another group funded by the Rashidians, composed of about three hundred young toughs armed with clubs and led by “well-known hooligans,” marched from the slums of south Tehran shouting “Long live the shah!” until they reached Sepah Square where troops loyal to Mosaddegh “fired hundreds of shots over the heads of the crowd.” Fanning out toward the city center, those “hoodlums” were joined by “people of all classes—many well dressed.”^{[60](#)}

In a later interview, MI6 agent Darbyshire explained the logic of his crowd strategy. “Once you start burning newspaper offices which are known to be pro-Mossadeq,” he said, “the mob starts coming out . . . and then it snowballs, which is what we intended to do. It was the correct psychological read of the Persian mob character. It was the Rashidans who provided people to infiltrate the demonstrations. I was personally giving orders and directing. It was a contingency plan because we had told them not to rely on Mossadeq folding.”^{[61](#)}

By 10:15 a.m., pro-shah military units had moved tanks and truckloads of troops to occupy most of the main squares in Tehran, refusing to check the demonstrators who now engulfed much of the city, attacking Mosaddegh’s supporters and destroying their offices. By this time, the British Foreign Office reported, “the whole police force was showing sympathy for the demonstrators,” even at times “directing the movement.”^{[62](#)}

At 12:00 noon, Kermit Roosevelt visited General Zahedi’s basement hiding place near the embassy and told him to await further instructions.

Meanwhile, pro-shah military forces leading a mass of demonstrators captured the main telegraph office and Army headquarters.⁶³

By 2:20 p.m., buses and trucks with “full loads of civilians, army officers, and policemen” overwhelmed the defenders of the radio station in fighting that left three dead, allowing Radio Tehran to begin broadcasting pro-shah propaganda—a critical move that finally gave the coup group what the CIA history called “firm control of the capital.”⁶⁴

At 4:00 p.m., Kermit Roosevelt returned to General Zahedi’s hiding place and arranged for a rebel tank to deliver him to Radio Tehran, where at 5:25 p.m. he spoke to the nation. With much of the city now secured, pro-shah mobs and military forces converged on Mosaddegh’s villa, where a protracted battle ensued.⁶⁵

By 7:00 p.m., pro-shah forces had breached the walls of Mosaddegh’s compound with tank shelling, while soldiers shot his security guards off the walls, leaving some three hundred dead. Amid the fighting, Mosaddegh escaped over a garden wall, only to surrender the next day to Prime Minister Zahedi. At a cost of \$20 million in CIA expenditures, £700,000 in MI6 outlays, and some three hundred dead Iranians, the coup had succeeded.⁶⁶

In Rome, when the shah heard of Mosaddegh’s overthrow, he trembled uncontrollably in fear and relief as he asked a reporter, “Can it be true?” Jumping to his feet in excitement, he added, “I knew it! I knew it! They love me.” Landing in Tehran three days later, he was warmly greeted by General Zahedi and Ambassador Henderson. Watching as the shah rode to the palace in the royal limousine, past dutiful throngs lining the streets, Ambassador Henderson made a fateful remark: “The Shah is living in a dream world. He seems to think his restoration was due entirely to his popularity with his people.”⁶⁷

CONSEQUENCES OF A COUP

Tehran was by no means the only capital awash in illusions about the shah’s triumph. Calling at the palace to congratulate the victorious shah, Kermit Roosevelt advised, with a mix of self-assurance and petty vindictiveness, that General Riyahi was “the guy who wrecked us in the first [coup] attempt” and thus “should be executed.” He then flew to London for a

luncheon at the Connaught Hotel, where he regaled the staff of the British secret service with “the glamorous features of the operation . . . as elaborately and excitingly as I possibly could.” Then he was off to 10 Downing Street, where he recounted the coup “in glamorous detail” while perched on the edge of the bed of Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who said, “If I were but a few years younger, I would have loved nothing better than to have served under your command in this great venture.”⁶⁸

Returning to Washington, Kermit Roosevelt held Secretary Dulles and President Eisenhower spellbound with his riveting narration of events in Tehran. The president awarded Roosevelt the National Security Medal as the first CIA officer to accomplish a regime change through covert action rather than a military operation that might have cost thousands of American lives. Seduced by the allure of that success, Eisenhower would make the CIA his preferred weapon for fighting the Cold War—authorizing, during his eight years in office, 170 covert interventions in forty-eight nations compared to only one conventional military invasion.⁶⁹

Ignoring the coup’s near failure, the CIA’s history described the events of August 19 as “a day that should never have ended . . . for it carried with it such a sense of excitement, of satisfaction and of jubilation that it is doubtful whether any other can come up to it.”⁷⁰ In his memoirs, CIA deputy director Ray Cline recalled that the “romantic gossip about the ‘coup’ in Iran spread around Washington like wildfire,” and Agency director Allen Dulles “basked in the glory of the exploit.” Within a matter of months, Cline added, “the legend of the CIA’s invincibility was confirmed . . . by a covert action project in Guatemala.”⁷¹ Cloaked in this heroic guise, the CIA was soon transformed from a small intelligence service into a powerful agency, coequal with the Pentagon and the State Department in shaping US foreign policy for the rest of the Cold War.

This Cold War triumph also had its material rewards. To thank America, the shah ordered new oil negotiations, supervised by the New York law firm Sullivan & Cromwell, that awarded a 40 percent share of Iran’s oil to a consortium of American companies and just 40 percent to British Petroleum—finalizing Iran’s move from British to American hegemony.⁷²

Everyone associated with the coup did well—including CIA director Allen Dulles, who would walk tall in Washington’s corridors of power for another decade; ambassador Loy Henderson, who became deputy under secretary of state; and Kermit Roosevelt, who was promoted to assistant

deputy director for covert operations. But Roosevelt soon resigned from the CIA to become vice president of Gulf Oil and later grew wealthy as a consultant, using contacts from his CIA days to broker a billion dollars in arms sales to the Middle East, in transactions tainted by bribes to local officials. His British comrade Norman Darbyshire was reassigned to Tehran during the 1960s as head of MI6, moving in elite circles, advising the shah, and living luxuriously in a villa with a swimming pool and stunning mountain views. After his return to England in 1975, however, heavy drinking and erratic behavior killed any chance of promotion, and Darbyshire retired four years later on a modest pension, bitter over the lack of recognition for his role in that historic coup. He died at age sixty-eight from a heart attack while mowing his lawn.⁷³

After the coup, the shah's mix of inept administration and relentless repression soon made him an Iranian version of King Farouk, leading his country on a rocky quarter-century ride into economic ruin and mass uprising. In the first decade of his direct rule, the shah built a formidable police state. With Agency assistance, his security service rounded up over three thousand Tudeh party members, many of whom were brutally tortured and some forty of whom were executed. Working with CIA advisers, the shah also formed two secret police organizations—the Second Bureau and the infamous SAVAK—and ordered them to root out “subversion,” crushing any flicker of democracy.⁷⁴

After his control was shaken by student riots in 1961, the shah approved a modest reform program that, within two years, evolved into his “White Revolution” featuring land reform, women's rights, and accelerated economic growth. Although a majority of the country's two million sharecroppers received lands, farmers soon lost their farms to creditors and landless laborers lost work to mechanization, sparking a mass migration to Tehran without any provision for “housing, amenities, or even jobs.” Angered by women's rights and relentless Westernization, Shi'ia Islam's mullahs were vocally critical of the reforms. When the shah granted US military advisers immunity from Iranian law, the influential cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini denounced him as a “wretched, miserable man.” Khomeini's fiery sermons inspired days of demonstrations in Tehran, which the military suppressed with rifle fire, killing hundreds. Dismissing Khomeini as “an obscure individual who claimed to be a religious leader,” the shah sent him into exile and imposed strict state controls over religion.⁷⁵

Fueled by oil profits that surged to \$20 billion following the 1973 oil embargo by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the shah went on a spending spree for American weapons, a lavish celebration of the monarchy, and dubious development schemes. As opposition grew, SAVAK jailed fifty thousand political prisoners, torturing them brutally, for which the shah was utterly unapologetic, telling the newspaper *Le Monde*: “Why should we not employ the same methods as you Europeans? We have learned sophisticated methods of torture from you.” Apparently assuming that the oil boom would last forever, the shah was ill prepared when global oil prices crashed in January 1977. During his thirty-year reign, the country’s population had doubled to thirty million, outstripping the economy’s capacity to provide meaningful employment. In those critical years, the US ambassador was former CIA director Richard Helms, whose presence, said the embassy’s chief political officer, served “to confirm that the Shah was our puppet.”⁷⁶

In the midst of a crippling general strike, the shah ordered his military to open fire against demonstrations, killing 1,500 people. When even that failed to stem the swelling protests, in January 1979 he flew into exile weeping visibly and leaving behind a caretaker government that was soon swept away when Ayatollah Khomeini returned to establish an Islamic theocracy, dashing any hopes for Iranian democracy.⁷⁷

Indeed, nearly fifty years after that CIA coup, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright finally admitted that the overthrow of Mosaddegh “was clearly a setback for Iran’s political development.” Compounding the damage, “the United States and the West gave sustained backing to the Shah’s regime” for the next quarter-century, which, she said, “brutally repressed political dissent.”⁷⁸

THE SUEZ CRISIS

The loss of hegemony over Iran was just one in a succession of heavy blows to British imperial power in the Middle East—including a chaotic withdrawal from Palestine in 1948; anti-British riots in Cairo that burned hundreds of buildings in 1952; and Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. By then, the accumulated emotional stress of retreating from one colony after another would push Britain’s ruling Conservative Party to

reclaim the Suez Canal, producing what a former foreign minister called the “dying convulsion of British imperialism.”⁷⁹

Britain’s man of the hour in dealing with the Middle East was Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, a name soon synonymous with imperial decline. As the fourth son of a baronet who could not inherit his family’s estate, Eden studied hard at Oxford University, where he became fluent in Persian and Arabic.⁸⁰ During World War II and again when Conservatives returned to power in 1951, Eden served as Winston Churchill’s foreign secretary. To shore up fading British influence in the Middle East, in February 1955 Eden formed the mutual-security Baghdad Pact with Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan—but not Syria or Egypt. During a visit to Cairo that same month, he tried to charm Prime Minister Nasser at a British embassy reception with his fluent Arabic. When Nasser said it was interesting to be inside the place that had long governed his country, Eden replied smugly, “Not governed perhaps, advised, rather”—a transparent falsehood that further alienated the Egyptian leader.⁸¹

Shortly after his return from Cairo and chafing under Churchill’s seemingly endless tenure, Eden pushed his mentor aside to become prime minister. Meanwhile, Nasser began searching for new allies after attending the non-aligned conference at Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955, where he met Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. Moreover, having tired of Britain’s slow-walk version of arms deliveries, Nasser asserted Egypt’s neutrality by purchasing about \$100 million in Soviet-bloc weapons, including MiG jets and tanks, raising diplomatic tensions with both London and Washington.⁸²

To sway Nasser from a Soviet dalliance, Britain and the United States offered to match a \$200 million World Bank loan for the construction of the Aswan High Dam on the Nile River—a massive project which promised to lift millions of Egyptian farmers from abject poverty. But just two months after Egypt recognized the People’s Republic of China in May 1956, Secretary of State Dulles cut aid, citing Egypt’s likely inability to complete the dam—a move Nasser denounced as an “invitation to the people of Egypt” to topple his regime.⁸³

Within a week, however, Nasser electrified a massive crowd at Alexandria by announcing that he was nationalizing the British-owned Suez Canal to finance the Aswan Dam. “Citizens,” he told the cheering throng, “we shall not let imperialists or exploiters dominate us. . . . Today, we actually achieve true sovereignty, true dignity and true pride. The Suez

Canal Company was a state within a state, . . . relying on imperialism and its stooges.” Denouncing Nasser as “the Hitler of the Nile,” the mass-circulation London paper, *Daily Mail*, thundered that the “theft of the Canal is a direct threat to the life of the British people” by threatening to cut “the lifeline of the Empire.” In response to the news, an apoplectic Prime Minister Eden convened an immediate council of war at 4:00 a.m. Calling Nasser a “Muslim Mussolini,” Eden ordered “him removed and I don’t give a damn if there’s anarchy and chaos in Egypt.” Simultaneously, however, President Eisenhower wrote Eden warning that “most of the world would be outraged” should there be an invasion without a prior attempt at diplomatic resolution, adding with some prescience that “initial military successes might be easy, but the eventual price might become far too heavy.”⁸⁴

Even though the canal was now irrevocably nationalized, Eden was still determined to kill Nasser, sparking a succession of bungled MI6 assassination attempts—bribing Nasser’s doctor to poison him, sending a three-man “hit team” from London, hiring a German mercenary killer in Cairo, and recruiting the deputy head of Egypt’s Air Force intelligence to plot a coup.⁸⁵ Complicating such attempts, the CIA station chief in Cairo leaked the MI6 plans to his Egyptian counterparts and Agency official Miles Copeland came to Cairo to warn Nasser personally.⁸⁶

With the assassination option failing, on October 22, 1956, the British foreign secretary met secretly with the prime ministers of France and Israel at a safe house near Paris to plot a two-stage seizure of the Suez Canal (carefully designed to deceive the White House as to what was being planned). The first phase started just seven days later when the Israeli army, led by the dashing General Moshe Dayan, swept across the Sinai Peninsula, destroying Egyptian tanks and coming within ten miles of the Suez Canal. On the spurious pretext of protecting the canal, the second phase was launched on October 31 when bombing by planes flying from six English and French aircraft carriers and British airfields on Cyprus smashed the Egyptian air force in just three days, destroying 104 of its new Soviet MiG jet fighters and another 130 aircraft.⁸⁷

But Nasser, mindful of the geopolitics the British had seemingly forgotten, deployed a strategy brilliant in its simplicity. After filling dozens of rusting cargo ships with rocks and scuttling them at the canal’s northern entrance, Egypt cut Europe’s oil lifeline to the Persian Gulf. By the time twenty-two thousand British and French forces began storming ashore at

the canal's north end on November 6, their objective, keeping the canal open, had already been snatched from their grasp.⁸⁸

From the moment the British bombing started, Eden's government faced a formidable diplomatic backlash. At an emergency meeting of the UN General Assembly, both the United States and the Soviet Union backed a motion calling for an immediate cease-fire. In Washington, President Eisenhower felt any support for the British "might well be to array the world from Dakar to the Philippine Islands against us." While anti-war demonstrators rallied in London, Eisenhower asked Eden in a transatlantic call, "Anthony, are you mad?"⁸⁹

When Washington demanded a complete withdrawal from the Canal Zone as the price of a billion-dollar International Monetary Fund bailout of the collapsing British currency, Eden capitulated. Ever since it accepted a \$3.75 billion US loan in 1946, Britain had been dependent on Washington's largesse, making a mockery of Eden's imperial bluster. Nonetheless, on November 2, he ordered another assassination attempt on Nasser. But the plot fizzled when weapons that MI6 had cached outside Cairo for its Egyptian assassins proved duds.⁹⁰

Just weeks after the last British soldier left Suez on December 22, 1956, Eden, discredited and disgraced, was forced to resign. Even so, his successor, Harold Macmillan, continued the assassination attempts. In October 1957, MI6 provided an Egyptian Air Force asset with a Remington razor loaded with explosives as a "gift" for Nasser. But the Egyptian president exposed the plot, revealing that the Air Force officer had been his double agent all along.⁹¹

In sum, the Suez Crisis revealed the rot deep inside Britain's apparatus of imperial power. The Royal Navy that had once ruled the waves was forced to retrieve aging warships from mothballs to form an invasion fleet. Instead of leading world diplomacy as it had done at Vienna in 1815 and Versailles in 1919, Britain was rebuked at the UN in 1956. Once the world's banker, London now lacked the finances for a relatively modest military intervention. Even its legendary secret service proved inept. The Conservative Party that had once built the British Empire backed this foolhardy set of interventions fully, raising questions about its fitness for world leadership.

BRITAIN AFTER SUEZ

In the aftermath of the Suez debacle, the United States would replace Britain as the dominant imperial power in the Middle East because, as Eisenhower put it, “the British and French have forfeited their position there and have no influence.” Ignoring that reality, in 1957 the British tried to compensate for the loss of the Suez Canal Zone by transforming their Red Sea enclave at Aden into a military bastion for imperial communications reaching from London to Singapore, making that protectorate another enticing target for Arab nationalism.⁹²

By 1961, the British cabinet secretary Norman Brook urged withdrawal from the Middle East. “We are fighting a losing battle propping up these reactionary regimes,” he argued. “Our policy takes no account of the rising tide of nationalism. . . . We are bound to find ourselves in the end on the losing side. We cannot win the propaganda battle against nationalism, and it is idle to spend money in trying to shout down Radio Cairo.”⁹³

Lending weight to those words, within a year a bloody war in North Yemen between royalists (supported by the Saudis) and nationalist rebels (backed by Egyptian troops) spilled into the adjacent British Protectorate of Aden. There, some seventeen thousand British troops relied on torture at Aden’s notorious Joint Interrogation Centre to battle Nasser’s allies. After eight years of merciless warfare with two hundred thousand deaths, the British quit the area in November 1967, leaving behind Nasser’s nationalist allies to establish the People’s Democratic Republic of South Yemen.⁹⁴

Despite the loss of Aden, Britain still ruled a string of Arab protectorates along the oil-rich south coast of the Persian Gulf from Oman to Kuwait, which it retained to create a self-contained neocolonial domain that it insulated from the Cold War—much as the French were doing on a larger scale in Francophone West Africa.⁹⁵ Within four years of that Yemen debacle, however, the unsustainable costs of even those limited overseas military commitments brought an end to the British Empire. In January 1968, Labour prime minister Harold Wilson announced that all British forces east of Suez would be withdrawn within three years. As part of that imperial retreat, in 1971 the British presided over independence for Bahrain, Qatar, and the seven sheikhdoms of the United Arab Emirates—thus quitting the last of their colonial enclaves in the Middle East.⁹⁶ The British then gave up the Royal Navy base at Bahrain, which was soon occupied by the US Navy.

THE COLD WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

As British influence receded, Washington was ready to fill the void. Not only did the Middle East lie at the midpoint in the arc of US military bases around Eurasia, but the West's growing dependence on oil exports would make the region a recurring flash point for Cold War conflict. To meet the voracious energy needs of a US-led global economy, the Middle East's share of global oil production would climb from just 7 percent in 1945 to a hefty 35 percent in 1973.^{[97](#)}

Starting in the mid-1950s, the US followed the British imperial preference for Arab aristocrats by cultivating conservative royalist regimes. Simultaneously, however, Moscow saw an opening in the Middle East and began courting Arab nationalist governments.^{[98](#)} When Britain negotiated a mutual-defense agreement under the Baghdad Pact with Turkey and Iraq in 1955, Egypt countered by signing a \$100 million arms deal with Moscow for MiG jets, tanks, and artillery. Three years later, a cabal of officers from the nationalist Baath Party massacred the royal family of Iraq, broke with Britain, and made overtures to Moscow.^{[99](#)}

Paralleling the growing Soviet-Egyptian alliance, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict provided Moscow with another way to challenge Washington's influence in the Middle East by arming the Arabs for three wars against Israel. When Egypt lost most of its tanks and jet fighters during the 1956 Suez Crisis, the Soviet Union delivered another round of massive arms shipments. A decade later, after Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping in mid-1967, Israel launched a surprise attack that destroyed most of Egypt's 2,500 tanks in the Sinai Peninsula, while simultaneously seizing the strategic Golan Heights from Syria. In that weeklong war, Egypt and Syria suffered total defeat, while thousands of new Palestinian refugees flooded into camps in Jordan and Syria.^{[100](#)}

To replace their lost weapons, Egypt and Syria again turned to Moscow for more military aid, which now included advanced Soviet S-125 anti-aircraft missiles and some twenty thousand Soviet advisers. Once the Egyptian army was fully rearmed, it was Israel's turn to suffer a surprise attack. On the eve of the Jewish High Holiday of Yom Kippur in October 1973, Syrian forces attacked the Golan Heights while a hundred thousand Egyptian troops, led by a thousand tanks, surged across the Suez Canal, pushing the Israelis back with heavy casualties that, according to Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, "exploded forever the myth of an invincible

Israel.” Quickly rearmed by a massive US airlift, the Israelis launched a blistering counteroffensive that came within a hundred kilometers of Cairo and just forty kilometers of Damascus before both sides accepted a cease-fire. Involving over a million troops, nine thousand armored vehicles, and a thousand combat aircraft, the Yom Kippur War would, paradoxically, provide Washington with the opportunity to play peacemaker, thereby “sidelining Moscow in the Middle East for four decades.”¹⁰¹ But first the world had to cope with an unprecedented oil embargo.

Angered by the Arab defeat in the Yom Kippur War, Libya announced a boycott of oil exports to the US and all of Israel’s allies, sparking a widespread embargo by the other members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. By 1973, oil accounted for 46 percent of total energy needs in the US, 60 percent in Western Europe, and a massive 73 percent in Japan. More than any other event during the Cold War, the oil embargo forced Washington to prioritize “protecting” the Middle East, which then held an overwhelming 63 percent of global oil reserves.¹⁰²

Consequently, President Jimmy Carter hosted the historic Camp David Accords in 1978, bringing the presidents of Egypt and Israel face-to-face for peace negotiations. The famous photo of President Carter facilitating the historic handshake between Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt was a diplomatic triumph honored by the Nobel Peace Prize for both leaders. More importantly, those accords led directly to an Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty a year later, making Egypt the first Arab nation to recognize Israel’s right to exist.¹⁰³

In the aftermath of the Camp David Accords, US aid to Egypt soared to \$2.5 billion in 1979 and would remain at the \$2 billion level for the rest of the Cold War, turning Egypt from a Soviet sympathizer into an American ally.¹⁰⁴ In a move that capped that transition, in 1980 the White House announced the “Carter Doctrine,” declaring that the US was committed to defending the Persian Gulf region.¹⁰⁵

THE COLD WAR’S LEGACY

That quarter-century of competition over the Middle East between London, Moscow, and Washington might have ended by 1980, but the impact of the Cold War has persisted to the present moment through the region’s

autocratic regimes. These leaders often served Washington better than they did their own peoples, prompting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to tell a Cairo audience in 2005: “For 60 years, my country the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy . . . in the Middle East, and we achieved neither.”¹⁰⁶

Taking a broader view, Egyptian opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, complained bitterly in 2011 that, after forty years of American dominion, the Middle East was “a collection of failed states that add nothing to humanity or science” because “people were taught not to think or to act, and were consistently given an inferior education.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, at the close of the Cold War in 1991, there was not a single functioning democracy in the entire Arab world. Its autocratic regimes were marked by corruption, repression, and poverty amid oil profits—a Cold War legacy that would continue to trouble the Middle East for decades to come.

Nor was the Middle East alone in suffering such sustained damage during the Cold War. In Central America as well, another stunningly successful CIA regime change in Guatemala sparked a protracted civil war, culminating in violence that engulfed much of that region during the 1980s and, as we will see, left a lasting legacy of civil conflict.



Former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt at a press conference after being freed from jail for his part in the break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters, Washington, DC, January 2, 1974. (Credit: California State University Archives, Everett Collection, Alamy)

CHAPTER 7

COVERT ACTION IN THE CARIBBEAN

After a succession of communist advances in Asia and Europe, in June 1954 Secretary of State John Foster Dulles appeared on national television to celebrate the defeat of a leftist government in Central America. “For several years international communism has been probing here and there for nesting places in the Americas,” he said. “It finally chose Guatemala as a spot . . . from which to breed subversion which would extend to other American Republics.” But now, Dulles added, “led by Colonel Castillo Armas, patriots arose to challenge the Communist leadership—and to change it.” Throughout his long, triumphal address, the secretary made no mention of the CIA’s clandestine maneuvers in Guatemala or the millions of dollars in covert cash responsible for those events.¹

Seven years later, another American leader would speak at length to explain not a victory but a major defeat in the Caribbean region. On April 20, 1961, the day after Fidel Castro’s army crushed an invasion of Cuba by 1,500 Miami exiles, a chastened President John F. Kennedy met the press, not to apologize but to call for an anti-communist crusade. “We face a relentless struggle in every corner of the globe,” said a somber president. “The complacent, the self-indulgent, the soft societies are about to be swept away with the debris of history. Only the strong . . . can possibly survive.” There was, of course, no mention of the CIA’s critical role in these events.²

The juxtaposition of those two speeches indicates how the Cold War changed Central America and the Caribbean from a secure American sphere into a major flash point of global conflict. At the start of the Cold War in 1947, Washington prioritized hemispheric defense by negotiating the Rio mutual-defense treaty with nineteen nations in the Western Hemisphere.

With its long history of harsh plantation labor, the overpopulated Caribbean region—with nine million people in Central America and seventeen million more in the islands—suffered from a grinding poverty that made it ripe for revolution. Throughout the Cold War, however, Washington would demonstrate an abiding antipathy to socialism or even social reform anywhere in its hemisphere—a policy clearly evident in Guatemala during this global conflict’s first decade.

Although seemingly a small, stable country with a population of only three million, Guatemala was, in fact, a fragile mix of Hispanic and Indigenous Maya peoples with a massive US corporate presence. After Guatemala gained its independence from Spain in 1821, the country had a deep class divide between the *ladino* elites and the Indigenous Maya communities that comprised two-thirds of the population. Following generations of stifling repression for the country’s Maya majority, reformist governments attempted to bring about social change from 1944 to 1954 by rewriting the social contract between the country’s powerful planters and their poor workers. In retrospect, US covert intervention in such a polarized country would be the catalyst for civil strife that would persist to the end of the Cold War, killing two hundred thousand people by the 1990s.³

GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

From the time the United States emerged as a world power in the 1890s, the Caribbean region was integral to both its continental defense plans and its domestic economy. After the Panama Canal opened in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson tried to secure its approaches by launching long-term military occupations in the Caribbean region—in Nicaragua (1912–33), Haiti (1915–34), and the Dominican Republic (1916–24). To repair injured relations with Latin America during the 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed a “good neighbor policy,” with a commitment to end the crude gunboat diplomacy of earlier decades.⁴

As the US began its strategic expansion in the region, American corporations started to invest heavily in Caribbean plantations, contributing to harsh working conditions and forging a tight economic bond with the ruling elites of its southern neighbors. Founded in 1899, the United Fruit Company soon controlled about 80 percent of US banana imports, while

transforming much of Central America into what famed American writer O. Henry called “banana republics.”⁵ By the 1930s, United Fruit owned both a “Great White Fleet” of eighty-five banana ships and over a million acres of land in Central America that would become the site of both labor unrest and bloody repression.⁶

After the depression of the 1930s crippled Guatemala’s economy, its Hispanic *ladino* elite elected General Jorge Ubico president in 1931. He would rule for nearly fourteen years through the army and a secret police that one US official called the “Guatemalan Gestapo.” The army itself was racially divided between 800 *ladino* officers and 5,500 Maya conscripts who, said Ubico, “arrive rude and brutish, but when they leave they are no longer like donkeys.” Through its close alliance with him, the United Fruit Company became “el Pulpo,” the Octopus—acquiring the country’s only railroad, its main port at Puerto Barrios, and, for a bargain price of just \$50,000, a 200,000-acre plantation. To secure labor for the planters, Ubico enacted a vagrancy law in 1934 that required landless Maya to work at least one hundred days a year for large landowners like United Fruit, which employed an estimated fifteen thousand workers.⁷ By the end of Ubico’s repressive rule in 1944, the company owned 500,000 acres, or 42 percent of Guatemala’s arable lands, but only 139,000 acres were actually cultivated. The rest of the acreage was left idle to prevent competition.⁸

During his long years in power, Ubico tried to encourage foreign investment by developing infrastructure, especially rural roads, that inadvertently encouraged a national consciousness among the country’s middle class. As criticisms of his rule culminated in demonstrations by teachers and students, Ubico was finally forced to resign in June 1944. Within months, a young officers’ coup led by Captain Jacobo Árbenz forced Ubico’s handpicked successor into exile. In subsequent democratic elections, a liberal academic, Dr. Juan José Arévalo, led his Partido Accion Revolucionaria (PAR) to victory with promises of reform that brought what one local writer called “years of spring in the land of eternal tyranny.”⁹ As part of his agenda, Arévalo promulgated a liberal labor code in 1947 that favored workers’ rights and enacted the Law of Forced Rental, which required fallow land to be rented to any peasant owning less than 2.47 acres.¹⁰ Most importantly for the United States, Arévalo also presided over the formation of a multiparty system, which included the Communist Party. Although only four members of his congress were communists, the

conservative planter oligarchy tarred Arévalo's reforms with the brush of socialism.¹¹

Amid such social turmoil, Guatemala's defense minister, Jacobo Árbenz, captured 64 percent of the vote in the 1950 elections to defeat a right-wing rival, General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, through the strong support of both Arévalo's PAR coalition and the leftist labor union, the Confederación General de Trabajadores.¹² Advised by several communists, President Árbenz then fulfilled his campaign promises by enacting an agrarian reform law that allowed expropriation of uncultivated land on large plantations, with compensation based on declared taxable value. Since United Fruit had undervalued its lands at just \$1.2 million for tax purposes, the company was incensed when the government expropriated about four hundred thousand acres from its farms. By 1954, a quarter of the country's arable land, some 1.4 million acres, had been distributed to a hundred thousand poor *campesino* families, half of whom also received small crop loans from government banks. In sum, without any significant violence, Árbenz's social reforms were on their way to giving the country's peasants both economic independence and a political voice.¹³

PRESSURES BUILD FOR US INTERVENTION

Furious over losing land, money, and control, United Fruit lobbied intensely throughout those four years of reforms to convince Washington that Guatemala faced the threat of communism.¹⁴ While the company pleaded for action, the CIA's chief of station in Mexico City, E. Howard Hunt, was working independently to overthrow this liberal Guatemalan government. Born near Buffalo, New York, where his father was a state lobbyist, Hunt joined the Navy at the start of World War II. But his father's connections to Buffalo native William Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services, soon won him a transfer to more exciting espionage duties in Burma and China. Struggling to make ends meet after the war, he cranked out at least four pulp novels, trashy thrillers with cleavage on the covers and terse titles like *Bimini Run*, *The Violent Ones*, and *Stranger in Town*, before joining the CIA. In December 1950, Hunt opened the Agency's new station in Mexico City along with his deputy, William F. Buckley Jr. (later famous as an

American conservative icon), and spent the next four years focused on the communist threat in neighboring Guatemala.¹⁵

In his memoirs, Hunt would describe the autonomy that gave free range to his fiction-fueled imagination and helped make him a latter-day man on the spot. “In Mexico,” he recalled, “being boss of a small station, I could be almost as courageous and daring as I could imagine. We broke into an embassy, turned defectors, and came up with plots that would have done Graham Greene proud.”¹⁶ When Mexican students he sent to attend a Catholic conference in Guatemala came back with stories of communist inroads there, Hunt warned CIA headquarters that “this thing could grow and become a cancer in Central America.” At first, Washington sent an agent who said, in Hunt’s words, “Why don’t you cool it—there’s no particular interest in what’s going on in Guatemala.” But he persisted until his reports won him an interview with the CIA director and permission for a break-in at the Guatemalan embassy in Mexico City to search for evidence that its ambassador there was attempting to purchase arms.¹⁷

By 1952, the CIA’s Directorate of Plans, which controlled covert operations, began to consider Guatemala a possible Soviet beachhead in the Americas. In launching an ill-fated operation code-named PBFortune, CIA director Walter Bedell Smith asked the head of the Agency’s Western Hemisphere Division, J. C. King, to identify a local leader who could support a covert intervention. As Hunt later recalled, there were only three likely candidates—a local lawyer for United Fruit whose illness soon eliminated him; General Ydígoras, whom the State Department dismissed as a “right-winger” without popular support; and, finally by default, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, who was “a very durable individual.”¹⁸

After agents met Castillo Armas in Honduras in June, CIA headquarters drew up plans to supply him with \$225,000 worth of weapons and, three months later, finalized plans for Operation PBFortune. Within weeks, however, King’s attempt to ship 250 rifles and 64 machine guns on a United Fruit freighter somehow leaked to Central American leaders. Fearing that a visible intervention could compromise the US Good Neighbor policy, which promised non-intervention in Latin America, Secretary of State Dean Acheson ordered the CIA director to cancel the operation, forcing King to store the arms in Panama and put Colonel Castillo Armas on a weekly stipend of \$3,000 to sustain his troops.¹⁹

OPERATION PBSUCCESS

Under the liberal Truman administration, United Fruit's lobbying efforts had proved unproductive. But once Republicans under Dwight Eisenhower took over in January 1953, the political climate changed dramatically. To transform Washington's diplomatic reluctance into a determined CIA coup, United Fruit played upon its many ties to the new administration. These included UN ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who belonged to an old Boston family whose fortunes had been made by investments in the company; his cousin, John Cabot, the State Department's director of Latin American affairs and the brother of United Fruit's former chief executive; and, most importantly, the Dulles brothers—Secretary of State John Foster and CIA director Allen—both of whom had worked at the influential New York firm Sullivan & Cromwell, the company's lawyers.²⁰

In addition, the new US ambassador to Guatemala, John Peurifoy, was a cold warrior fresh from a posting to Greece, where he had supported the anti-communist government there. During a six-hour dinner with President Árbenz and his wife Maria, Peurifoy became concerned about their “friendship” with communists and cabled Washington: “I am definitely convinced that if the President is not a Communist, he will certainly do until one comes along”—adding ominously that “normal approaches will not work in Guatemala.”²¹

Caught between the need for diplomatic restraint and a growing global imperative for intervention, Washington found a way to mediate such competing pressures: CIA covert action. In mid-1953, the Eisenhower administration convened what came to be known as the Solarium talks, which adopted a “new look” foreign policy of relying on “atomic capability” for the defense of Europe and Asia, while using “covert measures . . . to counter any . . . party or individuals directly or indirectly responsive to Soviet control . . . in a free world country.”²² As a result, that December the president approved a \$3 million budget for covert intervention against Árbenz, dubbed Operation PBSuccess, that prioritized the tactics of psywar and subversion to the tune of \$540,000 and air power amounting to \$800,000.²³ To conceal Washington's lead role in what would be staged as a home-grown coup, the CIA selected Colonel Castillo Armas, who had once trained at the US military base Fort Leavenworth and had what the Agency called an “above average” military record.²⁴

To strengthen its fledgling rebel army, the CIA formed an air force through a semi-clandestine network affiliated with the Civil Air Transport (CAT), a CIA-owned company. After running CAT's operations in Asia, Whiting Willauer became ambassador to Honduras in March 1954, using that post to round up "a motley assortment of bush pilots" to man the CIA's dozen rebel aircraft based at an abandoned airfield in nearby Nicaragua.²⁵ As planning at CIA headquarters moved well beyond his furtive initiatives, Howard Hunt felt "betrayed" by being reduced to "a hireling for United Fruit," but he still agreed to run the operation's psychological warfare operations, which he described as "a terror campaign."²⁶

Since the small force of four hundred untrained rebels under Colonel Castillo Armas could not possibly defeat one of Central America's largest armies, these psywar operations were expected to play a critical role in crippling the Guatemalan military. As a CIA memo to President Eisenhower explained, "the entire effort is thus more dependent upon psychological impact rather than actual military strength," and its success thus relied on creating "the *impression* of very substantial military strength" rather than strength per se.²⁷

Paralleling this propaganda effort, the CIA was also building an anti-Árbenz coalition in Guatemala among students, the military, and the country's Catholic Church, whose archbishop, Mariano Rossell y Arellano, was an active anti-communist. But in another slapstick development that would give the coup a comic-opera aura, the CIA's contact with the anti-communist opposition, the Panamanian commercial attaché Jorge Isaac Delgado, turned out to be a double agent who gave Árbenz copies of his correspondence with the Americans.²⁸

While the CIA was plotting its coup, United Fruit launched a parallel public relations "barrage that sent correspondents from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times* . . . to report on communist activities in Guatemala," thereby creating strong US domestic support for intervention. With the preparatory propaganda reaching a fever pitch, the CIA launched a ramshackle coup in May 1954 that ultimately moved, in just sixty days, through three tumultuous phases from near disaster to stunning success.²⁹

PHASE ONE (MARCH TO JUNE 1954)

Driven by the intimidating aura of US global power, the operation's first phase was marked by diplomacy and propaganda aimed at preparing the political ground for an invasion. In March 1954, Guatemala's foreign minister, Guillermo Toriello, delivered an impassioned denunciation of US pressures on his country before a meeting of the Organization of the American States in Caracas. But instead of criticizing US policy, the organization condemned communism by a vote of 17–1, making it clear to Árbenz that he was diplomatically isolated.³⁰

The Guatemala coup soon became one of the CIA's largest operations to that point, with forty operatives in the field and another thirty propaganda personnel at Opa-Locka Airport near Miami under the leadership of Hunt and Al Haney, a pugnacious CIA officer. While the psywar team cranked out radio scripts with the "melodrama that characterized Hunt's thrillers," the scripts' production fell to the manager of the CIA's radio broadcasts, David Atlee Phillips, who had worked in Chile as a film actor, playing, as he put it, "a devil-may-care gringo who makes violent love to three passionate sisters one after another, *uno, dos, tres*." After Hunt sought the assistance of Cardinal Francis Spellman in New York, the Catholic clergy in Guatemala issued a pastoral letter on April 9 calling on their people to "rise as a single mass against the enemy of God and country." Hunt's psywar team also airdropped thousands of leaflets with the same message—"way out on the hinterland," as he put it, "where you had basically just a Mayan population."³¹

Realizing that most of Guatemala's population was illiterate and anti-Árbenz leaflets were largely ineffective, Hunt's team soon shifted its psywar to radio. Seeking a better alternative to the almost inaudible broadcasts into Guatemala, Phillips established what Hunt called "a very powerful radio station of our own," La Voz de Liberación, just across the border in Honduras, which "would override the beam of the Guatemalan national radio." Since only one of every fifty Guatemalans even owned a radio and most of the country's seventy-one thousand radio sets were concentrated in the capital, the propaganda's impact was felt mainly by the urban elite, particularly the officer corps, whose demoralization would prove key to the coup's success.³²

On May 1, 1954, the CIA pirate radio station began broadcasting and, by a turn of sheer luck, the Guatemalan state radio went off the air to replace a broken antenna, providing the CIA an opening to fill the airwaves with

fabricated stories. Broadcasting under the slogan of “Trabajo, Pan y Patria” (Work, Bread, and Country), the CIA’s station posed as a mouthpiece for Guatemalan exiles who would soon return. Adding to the government’s difficulties, two weeks later a Swedish freighter, the *Alfhem*, arrived at Guatemala’s Puerto Barrios with arms Árbenz had purchased from communist Czechoslovakia after a US embargo. The State Department soon spun that shipment into sinister evidence of a Soviet plot to conquer the Americas. The *Washington Post* warned that “the threat of Communist imperialism . . . has arrived,” while the *New York Times* added that the weapons would “find their way to Communist rebels throughout the Americas.”³³

After the Navy imposed a sea blockade on May 24 that, according to one historian, “packed a psychological punch,” CIA aircraft, flown by mercenary pilots, “bombed” key military posts and the presidential palace with leaflets encouraging support for the rebels. On June 5, a retired Guatemalan Air Force commander flew to neighboring Nicaragua, where the CIA doctored his words for a broadcast that sounded like a call to rebellion. Upon hearing that broadcast, Árbenz promptly grounded his planes for fear of defections, effectively ceding command of the air to the rebels.³⁴

As the sense of threat mounted by the end of June, the Árbenz government suspended civil liberties, arresting hundreds of suspected subversives and killing at least seventy-five—effectively crushing Castillo Armas’s clandestine apparatus in the capital. Nonetheless, the army began breaking with the government since, as one officer recalled, “we were under enormous pressure. The US military mission even hinted that the United States would invade.” As Bill Krieg, the embassy’s deputy chief of mission, recalled, American intervention was “only hinted at—but I am sure that the Guatemalan officers got the point.”³⁵

PHASE TWO (JUNE 18–20, 1954)

All these psywar operations were intended to create an environment that would allow Colonel Castillo Armas to launch an invasion with just four hundred ill-trained rebels and defeat a national army of six thousand troops. On June 18, the colonel did indeed mount a multipronged assault with what

the CIA's David Phillips called "a hundred fifty ragtag recruits" and the rebel radio station described as "an army of five thousand men."³⁶

In striking contrast to the triumphal radio broadcasts, the offensive, which ended up having about 480 rebel "shock troops," soon collapsed into what the CIA called "tragicomedy," since the colonel's five columns failed to advance much beyond the country's border with Honduras and El Salvador. In fact, even before the offensive could cross the frontier, the southernmost squad was jailed by Salvadoran authorities. In the north, rebel aircraft blew up a rail bridge at Gualan to demoralize the town's defenders, but a lowly lieutenant leading just 30 soldiers held off an attack by 122 rebel troops for thirty-six hours before forcing the 30 surviving rebels to retreat. Farther south, Castillo Armas, riding in an old station wagon, led a band of a hundred men that occupied the undefended town of Esquipulas just a few miles from the border. Simultaneously, however, the main rebel column of two hundred men suffered a massive defeat in their attack on the city of Puerto Barrios, where police and "hastily armed dockworkers" forced the rebels back across the border.³⁷

In the capital Guatemala City, the initial shock of the bombing soon faded as the population realized that there was no imminent threat. Just days after the invasion started, Ambassador Peurifoy began to fear the coup might fail and cabled CIA director Allen Dulles, "Bomb repeat Bomb." At Agency headquarters, the operation's chief, Richard M. Bissell Jr., was "only too aware how perilously close to failure we were." From his base at Opa-Locka, Al Haney cabled Washington: "Castillo Armas efforts widely described as farce." By June 23, Howard Hunt felt "Armas would soon be rounded up and captured."³⁸

REBEL INVASION GUATEMALA, 1954





To pull the operation back from the brink of defeat, the CIA amped up its psychological warfare bulletins, claiming that Colonel Castillo Armas was advancing steadily on the capital—disinformation that would turn the tide by persuading Guatemalan officers to break with Árbenz.

PHASE THREE (JUNE 22–30, 1954)

In its final phase, the CIA's airpower would rescue Operation PBSuccess from the beckoning jaws of defeat.³⁹ After two of the three rebel fighter aircraft were disabled, the CIA's Al Haney called Washington from Opa-Locka airfield to request replacements. Advised by CIA director Dulles on June 22 that the invasion had “zero” chances of success without airpower, Eisenhower turned to a wealthy donor, aviation executive William Pawley, saying: “Bill, go ahead and get the planes.” Without delay, Pawley went to a bank near the White House, withdrew \$150,000, and drove to the Pentagon where he handed over the cash, thereby sending three new P-47 fighters into combat within a day. On June 25, those planes launched effective attacks—sinking a British freighter loading cotton on the coast and strafing troop trains advancing on the town of Zacapa, forcing government soldiers to continue their advance on foot. After visiting Zacapa that same day and finding officers there unwilling to fight, leftist leaders warned Árbenz that the army could no longer be relied upon. To confirm this information, the president sent a trusted colonel to that town. “The officers don’t want to fight,” the colonel reported. “They think the Americans are threatening Guatemala just because of you. . . . If you don’t resign, the army will march on the capital to depose you.” It mattered little that, back at the border, Castillo Armas’s attack had been pushed back and he had still advanced only six miles from where he had started.⁴⁰

At this critical turning point on June 25, Árbenz summoned his cabinet and proposed arming the people to fight both the army and the rebels,

prompting labor union leaders to quietly break with the government. That same day, the CIA reported that “Guatemalan army officers are . . . becoming convinced that getting rid of President Árbenz and the Communists would be ‘an easy way out.’” Meanwhile, in New York, the UN Security Council debated for five hours before refusing to consider the Guatemalan matter—ending any chance of international intervention.⁴¹

Deciding it was time for the “final big lie,” on June 27, the CIA’s radio station broadcast propaganda that two rebel columns were converging on the capital, circulating fake orders for Commander Y to “send to Commander X three hundred of your men.” In fact, said the CIA’s David Phillips, there were “not even three men available.” The propaganda also tried to persuade Guatemalan army officers that the US itself might indeed invade. “The officers were aware that it might be better if Arbenz stepped down,” one Guatemalan colonel recalled. “The propaganda of the U.S. was devastating.” At 8:00 p.m. that day, President Árbenz, exhausted by the relentless psychological pressure, suddenly resigned and sought refuge in the Mexican embassy—leaving the government in the hands of a liberal officer, Colonel Carlos Enrique Díaz. Looking back, the CIA’s Phillips concluded that Árbenz “would not have resigned had he not been manipulated into what he conceived as an impossible situation by the rebel radio.”⁴²

With Colonel Castillo Armas and his rebels still far from the capital, Colonel Díaz formed a junta and vowed to rout the “mercenary invaders of Guatemala.” But, angered by that message, two top CIA officers called at the presidential palace just after midnight on June 28 and told Díaz, “Colonel, you’re just not convenient for the requirements of American foreign policy.” And just like that, the first junta vanished, to be succeeded by four more in only eleven days—with each one growing ever more pro-American than the last. Finally, during negotiations in the neighboring capital of San Salvador on July 2, Ambassador Peurifoy, playing the imperial viceroy, bullied the Guatemalan military into forming a junta headed by Castillo Armas and then flew him back to Guatemala City on an American aircraft for installation in the presidential palace.⁴³

When informed of Árbenz’s resignation on June 28, President Eisenhower was doodling on a cabinet agenda paper and quickly drew a self-portrait with the trim, bared torso of a Greek god superimposed over

sketches of Navy gunboats labeled “Guatemala”—an apt illustration of how the heroic aura of covert action had captivated Cold War Washington.⁴⁴

Two days later on June 30, the CIA’s Frank Wisner ended the covert operation by cabling Agency headquarters a coded message: “The surgeons to step back and the nurses to take over the patient.” In a bid to conceal the CIA’s role, Eisenhower told a press conference on July 1: “The people of Guatemala in a magnificent effort have liberated themselves from the shackles of international communist direction.” Basking in the glow of victory, Secretary of State Dulles gave a lengthy televised address on Guatemala, condemning “the evil purpose of the Kremlin to destroy the inter-American system” and congratulating the people of Guatemala because “the situation is being cured by the Guatemalans themselves.”⁴⁵

In mid-August, the leaders of the coup—CIA director Allen Dulles, covert operations chief Frank Wisner, and other Agency officials—had a triumphal briefing at the White House, prompting the president to ask how many men Castillo Armas had lost. The CIA briefer lied, saying “only one.” Impressed, Eisenhower replied “incredible.” While official Washington celebrated the coup as a cost-effective Cold War victory, crowds across Latin America demonstrated against the intervention with anger that renowned artist Diego Rivera captured in a mock-heroic mural published in the Mexican press. That enduring grievance was amply evident four years later when mobs attacked Vice President Richard Nixon’s motorcades as he toured South America’s capital cities.⁴⁶

After Árbenz spent seventy-two days confined inside the Mexican embassy along with hundreds of refugees, President Castillo Armas allowed him safe passage to Mexico City. Although rightists blew up his decoy car en route to the airport, Árbenz arrived safely at the terminal, where the military ordered him to strip to his underpants before the press—a calculated humiliation designed to destroy his image with the poor. Among the many leftists who fled Guatemala in the coup’s aftermath was an Argentine physician, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who left with lessons that would later have fateful consequences for the United States in Cuba.⁴⁷

CONSEQUENCES OF THE COUP

In retrospect, the CIA coup left an ambiguous legacy for all the principals no matter what side they were on. In due time, all the major actors wound up disgraced, dead, or both.

After searching the palace in the coup's chaotic aftermath and seizing 150,000 documents from the former president's papers, CIA agents found little evidence of Soviet ties but uncovered ample personal information for a decade-long disinformation campaign that would further degrade Árbenz's image as a social reformer. For the next fifteen years, the ex-president was dogged by constant CIA surveillance, even by Howard Hunt, who followed him around Montevideo. During his long exile's journey through a half-dozen foreign capitals, American diplomatic pressure denied Árbenz the right to speak, work, or publish until he finally died in a Mexico City bathtub, possibly by suicide.⁴⁸

In the aftermath of the coup, the United Fruit Company prospered for a few years. But, "stung" by the international outrage over his country's intervention, Secretary of State Dulles prodded the Justice Department to file an anti-trust suit against the company that eventually forced it to sell its Guatemalan railroads and most of its lands to local businessmen. After the company suffered a \$43 million loss in 1975 and faced criminal charges for bribing the Honduran government, its chairman broke open an office window with his briefcase and jumped to his death from the forty-fourth floor of the Pan Am Building. A decade later, however, a corporate merger would revitalize the company and allow it to capture the US market for bananas with its Chiquita brand.⁴⁹

Once in power, Colonel Castillo Armas dropped the pose of moderation he had displayed for his CIA handlers and built a right-wing police state—banning all political parties, returning much of United Fruit's lands, and forcing nearly a hundred thousand peasants off the farms they had received under Árbenz. As the new president's corruption crippled the economy, Washington was forced to offer Guatemala \$53 million in aid to prevent what the National Security Council called "a disastrous political setback for the United States." Following three years of scandals, President Castillo Armas was murdered by a bodyguard in July 1957.⁵⁰

After winning the next elections, General Miguel Ydígoras quickly imposed a right-wing regime that canceled what was left of civil liberties and provided the CIA with military bases to train anti-Castro Cubans for the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. But two years after the invasion, a hard-right

defense minister ousted Ydígoras, plunging Guatemala into a spiral of violence that would persist for thirty years and kill two hundred thousand people in a population of five million.⁵¹ As the Cold War drew to a close in 1988, Guatemala's Catholic bishops stated that "the hunger for land is the root of injustice in our society," adding that Árbenz's agrarian reform had been "the only serious attempt to reform this situation of profound injustice."⁵²

Coming so soon after the stunning success of the CIA's coup in Iran, the overthrow of Árbenz added to the allure of covert operations in Cold War Washington. Indeed, right after the Guatemala operation was over, the CIA's Frank Wisner sent a cable claiming the plan had "surpassed even our greatest expectations."⁵³ Yet, had the CIA looked more closely at that comic-opera covert operation, it might not have pursued later interventions with such confidence. "The heady success of the cheap war," said the CIA's Howard Hunt, "would lead to many unfortunate years in which successive administrations would try to duplicate unsatisfactorily our perceived success in Cuba, Chile, Vietnam."⁵⁴

THE CIA INVASION OF CUBA

Unfortunately, from a US perspective, the CIA's intervention in Guatemala became what the Agency's chief historian called "a sound model for future operations." Indeed, by closely following that model, its later invasion of Cuba would produce Washington's greatest debacle during the four decades of the Cold War—inflicting a searing defeat while bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war.⁵⁵ Such a disaster grew out of the convergence between Washington's Cold War strategy and an urge to perpetuate its regional hegemony over Latin America.

After securing its independence in 1901, Cuba was ruled by wealthy autocrats aligned with US interests who let discontent grow among the country's peasants, students, workers, and academics, culminating in Fidel Castro's overthrow of the corrupt Batista regime in 1958. Convinced that Castro's new communist government in Cuba threatened Latin America's security, the Eisenhower White House, inspired by an inflated assessment of its earlier success in Guatemala, authorized the planning of a disastrous CIA invasion to topple Cuba's communist regime.

The revolution that Washington found so threatening was the culmination of Cuba's half-century of corrupt, autocratic rule by the island's entrenched planter elite. Those decades of poor governance culminated in the election of Gerardo Machado, a wealthy sugar planter, who took office in 1925 promising reforms but quickly defaulted to a mix of corruption, repression, and strong US support. After his bid for a third term produced months of protests, an army battalion rebelled in August 1933 and Machado left on a flight for the Bahamas the next day.⁵⁶ While an interim government was struggling to re-establish order, Sergeant Fulgencio Batista, the son of a poor cane cutter, led the "revolt of the sergeants."⁵⁷

Although Cuba still had civilian presidents, Batista would essentially control the country for the next seven years with Washington's backing. In 1940, he launched a populist campaign for president and, supported by a leftist coalition that included the Communist Party, defeated liberal reformer Ramón Grau. Once his handpicked successor lost the next election to reformer Grau in 1944, Batista plundered the treasury and left for Miami to pursue business opportunities.⁵⁸

After returning to win a seat in the Cuban Senate and thereby qualify again for the presidency, Batista's 1952 campaign began to falter, so he simply seized power in a coup and would legitimate his authoritarian rule two years later with a rigged election.⁵⁹ Jettisoning his leftist allies, Batista became a fervent anti-communist, banning the party in 1953 and forming a brutal Anti-Communist Squad that operated a "virtual chamber of horrors" where activists were tortured and killed.⁶⁰

MAFIA'S HAVANA

After Batista's 1952 coup, US organized crime invested countless millions of dollars to make Havana a virtual Mecca for American tourists—with a dozen luxury hotels, high-stakes casinos, lavish night clubs, and nearby brothels, creating a thriving tourist industry that employed about 20 percent of the city's workforce.

During the US economic boom of the 1950s, mafia bosses Meyer Lansky and Santo Trafficante Jr. forged a sub-rosa partnership with President Batista and invested a combined \$20 million to build their own hotels in Havana. With the same mix of gambling and glitzy night life the

mob was using to create Las Vegas, they made the Cuban capital into a veritable free port for organized crime. Between 1952 and 1955, the number of tourists grew by 35 percent as Pan Am airlines introduced a cheap \$35 ticket for Miami-Havana flights and ferries began carrying cars over from Florida.⁶¹

The ensuing corruption extended deep into the rapacious Batista regime, which collected kickbacks from Lansky's casinos (\$1.3 million monthly), from the city's ten thousand slot machines, and even from Havana's ubiquitous parking meters. During his seven-year rule, Batista also cultivated US corporations, which invested a billion dollars in Cuba, while the island's sugar planters enjoyed the third highest income in Latin America. As the tourists gambled and local elites socialized, the many poor among the island's six million people wallowed in misery. "The rapacity of the leadership," a US State Department white paper on Cuba reported, "is an open invitation to revolution."⁶²

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

As Batista's dictatorship tightened its grip on power, a student activist named Fidel Castro turned to armed revolution. In July 1953, he was captured in an abortive attack on Moncada Barracks with 160 followers that landed him in prison. Exiled to Mexico, Castro began gathering guerrillas and also met Argentine radical Che Guevara, who had recently escaped from the CIA's coup in Guatemala. In November 1956, Castro, Che, and eighty-two fighters boarded a leaky sixty-foot power boat and landed in eastern Cuba. After two years of building their army and forging a coalition of opposition forces, Che Guevara led three hundred guerrillas in fighting their way across Cuba, seizing town after town until they approached Havana.⁶³

Although other mobsters quickly moved their investments to Las Vegas, Meyer Lansky was confident enough to keep his assets in place, because, as one CIA veteran of the anti-Castro operations stated, "the mob sent emissaries," most likely Lansky's brother Jake, manager of the Hotel Nacional's casino, to offer Castro the same deal they had with Batista. After a final bash on New Year's Eve of 1958, Batista fled to the Dominican Republic with \$300 million in plunder. Nine days later, the rebels drove into

Havana, where Castro soon broke whatever bargain he might have had—banning gambling, seizing mob hotels, and confiscating Lansky’s \$17 million in casino cash. Trafficante had also stayed on, but the new regime jailed him for several months before he was allowed to leave, stripped of all assets and ready for revenge.⁶⁴

Since Che Guevara had observed firsthand how entrenched elites had overturned Guatemala’s attempt at social reform, he led the Castro regime in a bid to “behead those who hold power and their lackeys,” crushing the opposition through summary justice for Batista’s police and the confiscation of upper-class assets. To carry out a more systemic repression, in 1961 Castro established his secret police, Dirección General de Inteligencia (DGI), and the Soviet secret service, the KGB, soon brought 1,200 Cubans to its Moscow Center for training, complicating the CIA’s later attempts at espionage. As Soviet-bloc arms started arriving, Castro quickly formed a military of 230,000 soldiers that were, said the CIA inspector general, “rapidly increasing in both quality and strength.”⁶⁵

After Castro nationalized US assets worth \$968 million and Washington imposed a complete economic embargo on the country, the Soviets sent Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan to Cuba in 1960. He recommended a close alliance with Castro, prompting Soviet shipments of conventional arms—tanks, rifles, mortars, and artillery.⁶⁶

THE BAY OF PIGS INVASION

From Washington’s Cold War perspective, something had to be done. On March 17, 1960, CIA director Allen Dulles made a formal proposal to the National Security Council to topple the Castro regime. In response, President Eisenhower approved a modest effort to train a “paramilitary force outside of Cuba” of small “two or three man units” for infiltration “into Cuba to organize, train and lead resistance forces recruited there.”⁶⁷ In its operational planning, the Agency, forgetting how close its earlier Guatemala coup had come to failure, adopted three essential elements of that operation—guerrilla training, propaganda via pirate radio, and recruitment of the CIA’s Guatemala veterans. Those included Jacob Esterline as overall head, E. Howard Hunt as political chief, and David Atlee Phillips as radio station manager. Summoning Hunt from

Montevideo, Uruguay, where he was CIA station chief, Tracy Barnes, the Agency's assistant deputy director for plans, said: "There must be absolutely no taint that the United States is involved. That's why we're bringing in the best. I'm reassembling most of the team from PBSuccess," the codename for the CIA coup in Guatemala.⁶⁸

In April 1960, drawing on his experience in that Guatemala coup, David Atlee Phillips built a 50,000-watt transmitter on Great Swan Island near Honduras and was soon beaming anti-Castro propaganda into Cuba. In mid-June, only a week after twenty-nine Cuban exiles arrived in Panama to start training "in small-unit infiltration," the CIA, showing the first signs of mission creep, increased their numbers to five hundred troops and began building a rebel air force—an expansion that required the Agency to move the operation's base to Guatemala through the help of its old ally, President Ydígoras.⁶⁹

A month later, during a four-day undercover visit to Havana, Howard Hunt found the island had become an armed garrison with informers everywhere. "Castro was secure and he was beloved by millions in Cuba," Hunt warned, "and it was a different situation than Guatemala."⁷⁰ On the basis of that visit, Hunt made four top-secret recommendations to his CIA superiors, Tracy Barnes and Richard Bissell: "1. Assassinate Castro *before* or coincident with the invasion . . . ; 2. Destroy the Cuban radio and television transmitters . . . ; 3. Destroy the island's microwave relay system . . . ; 4. Discard any thought of a popular uprising against Castro." None of these goals, Hunt would report, were implemented by the time of the invasion, although Tracy Barnes did assure him that Castro's assassination was "in the hands of a special group."⁷¹

In August, Eisenhower approved a CIA budget of \$13 million for a Cuban invasion, but specified that no US troops should participate.⁷² That same month Bissell, the head of the Cuban operation, won the CIA director's approval for what a declassified Agency memo called "a sensitive mission requiring gangster-type action." Working through mafioso Johnny Roselli, who had once managed a Havana casino for Trafficante, a CIA intermediary visited Miami's Fontainebleau Hotel in September. There, he offered Trafficante and Chicago mob boss Sam Giancana \$150,000 for Castro's murder. When they asked for "some type of potent pill that could be placed in Castro's food and drink," the CIA produced a botulinum pill that Trafficante's Havana operative later tried, unsuccessfully, to insert in

Fidel's milkshake. A full fifteen years later, just days before he was to testify to the Senate, Giancana was fatally shot at his Chicago home. A year later, in August 1976, Roselli, who had told the Senate about arranging CIA assassination attempts in Cuba, was found floating in Miami Bay in a steel barrel. But Trafficante survived to tell a congressional committee that trying to kill Castro was "a good thing." In effect, Cuba's shift from American to Soviet hegemony circa 1960 had created a geopolitical rupture that transformed Trafficante from a criminal outcast into the CIA's man on the spot for Cuba—immunized by the government not only to kill Castro but, very likely, the mobsters who had exposed the CIA's Mafia ties.⁷³

Reflecting continuing mission creep, on November 4, 1960, the CIA ordered its Guatemala base to expand its 370 Cuban trainees into an "amphibious assault force of at least 1,500" for an invasion that would serve as a "a catalyst to a general uprising."⁷⁴ Over the next six months, that shift would require the Agency to organize a complex military operation far beyond its covert capacities. Indeed, the CIA's inspector general later found the operation had suffered from poor intelligence, inept training, abysmal planning, recurring racism, inept air support, and mismanaged maritime operations. "As the project grew," the inspector reported, "the Agency reduced the exiled leaders to the status of puppets, thereby losing the advantages of their active participation."⁷⁵

Indeed, the CIA's Howard Hunt faced real difficulties in forming Miami's fractious Cuban exiles into an effective future government. Those exiles were led, he said, by "professional politicians whose trade was public demagoguery and private intrigue," but who were still "shrewd enough to . . . realize they're not much more than puppets."⁷⁶ After finally dismissing Hunt for his divisive insistence on appointing the rightist Manuel Artime as the overall leader of the future government, the CIA formed the Frente Revolucionario Democrático in June 1960 with José Miró Cardona, a former prime minister, as leader and Artime as military chief. As infighting among the factionalized exile government "grew ever more intense," the CIA decided to keep its two elements quite separate—with the politicians in Miami and the fighters in Guatemala.⁷⁷

A week after the US elections in November 1960, the CIA's Cuban Task Force reached a surprising conclusion while preparing to brief President-elect John F. Kennedy. "Our original concept," the group said, "is now seen to be unachievable in the face of the controls Castro has instituted." Then,

in a fateful choice of words, the group added: “Our second concept (1,500–3,000 man force to secure a beach with airstrip) is also now seen to be unachievable, except as a joint Agency/DOD [Department of Defense] action.”⁷⁸

Ignoring such reservations, the CIA presented a new plan to President Eisenhower in late November proposing the infiltration of eighty-men teams combined with an invasion by seven hundred men “to seize and hold a limited area in Cuba” that—so they imagined—would “trigger a general uprising,”⁷⁹ But Eisenhower ordered that “we should be prepared to take more chances and be more aggressive.”⁸⁰ Under the code name JMClear, the CIA formed a rebel air force, training Cuban exile pilots, recruiting members of the Alabama National Guard, and purchasing fifteen B-26 bombers—chosen since Castro’s Air Force had inherited six of the same aircraft from the Batista regime.⁸¹

On January 19, 1961, the day before Kennedy’s inauguration, Eisenhower gave his successor a hasty briefing about Cuba, which was necessarily sketchy since, as his outgoing national security adviser stated, “there wasn’t any military plan formulated by the time the Eisenhower administration went out.”⁸²

HAND-OFF TO THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION

In the three months between his inauguration on January 20, 1961, and the invasion on April 17, there would be an unresolved tension between President Kennedy’s desire for a low-profile guerrilla campaign and the CIA’s mission creep toward an ever-larger conventional invasion. Throughout weeks of meetings and memos with incremental changes, there was a general agreement about two key features of the invasion plans: the small rebel force of 1,500 men would find it difficult to hold their beachhead for more than a few days, but they could still fall back for protracted guerrilla warfare in the nearby mountains.

At a CIA briefing for President Kennedy on January 28, the Joint Chiefs of Staff advised that none of the plans under review could overthrow Castro. In a formal evaluation five days later, the Pentagon cautioned that “lacking a popular uprising or substantial follow-on forces, the Cuban Army could eventually reduce the beachhead.”⁸³

To assuage such serious doubts about its proposed invasion, the CIA quickly concocted a fallback option of guerrilla warfare in nearby mountains, which it would cite repeatedly whenever its plans were criticized. On February 8, the Agency's Richard Bissell told the president that the Pentagon agreed the CIA plan for the rebel brigade's landing had "a fair chance of success. . . . At worst, the invaders should be able to fight their way to the Escambray [Mountains] and go into guerrilla action."⁸⁴ That same day, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy reported that both the CIA and the Defense Department "at worst . . . think the invaders would get into the mountains." Nine days after that, Bissell, the chief of the operation, stated confidently that "the landing can be the means of establishing in favorable terrain a powerful guerrilla force which could be sustained almost indefinitely."⁸⁵

By early March 1961, the CIA's planning had cohered into something close to an executable plan. But President Kennedy was still skeptical and insistent on alternatives, sparking six weeks of dysfunctional wrangling. At the White House on March 11, the CIA presented its Trinidad Plan based on "the holding of a perimeter around the beachhead area" at that town, located near the Escambray Mountains. The Agency again added: "If the initial actions proved to be unsuccessful in thus detonating a major revolt, the assault force would retreat to the contiguous mountain area and continue operations as a powerful guerrilla force." But Kennedy, who favored a quieter night invasion, ordered "a plan to be prepared which would be less spectacular in execution, and therefore more plausible as an essentially Cuban operation."⁸⁶

Three days later, the CIA met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to review its new Zapata Plan, which moved the landing a hundred miles away from the town of Trinidad to the Bay of Pigs. The military, however, concluded that a landing at this new target was much more likely to fail than the original Trinidad Plan. Nonetheless, on March 15, the CIA's Dulles and Bissell presented the president with three alternatives, and Kennedy opted for the Bay of Pigs landing but still insisted on further changes to conceal the US role even more. The next day, Kennedy gave his conditional approval to the Zapata Plan's landing at the Bay of Pigs. Several days after that, Bissell briefed Attorney General Robert Kennedy, again insisting that the invasion "really can't be a failure, because once they land on the beach, even if as a

military force they don't win, they can always stay in Cuba and be guerrillas.”^{[87](#)}

CIA PLANS, APRIL 1961 BAY OF PIGS, CUBA



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While Bissell was assuring his superiors that the CIA's plan was a surefire success, the operation's military leaders, Jacob Esterline and Jack Hawkins, called at his house to resign on Saturday April 8, complaining that the politicians "were making it technically impossible to win." But Bissell persuaded them to stay on. The next day, a dozen of the operation's mid-ranking CIA officers met for an alcohol-fueled Sunday lunch. "You men are masquerading as experts in overthrowing a government," the task force's chief of operations announced after several rounds of martinis and brandies. "Have any of you entertained the notion that this damned thing might not work?" With a few more brandies under their belts, the whole crew swallowed their doubts, went back to the office, and soldiered on.⁸⁸

At a meeting on April 12, just four days before the invasion, the CIA briefed the president and senior National Security Council officials on its final Zapata Plan. By then, there were three key components: on Day One, 1,500 exiles land at the Bay of Pigs; on Day Two, the CIA's rebel pilots win complete control of the air by destroying the Cuban Air Force; and, during the following week, the rebels hold the beachhead with tanks while their aircraft land both an exile government and the "arms and equipment . . . to furnish 30,000 dissidents expected to rally to the invasion force." On that critical final point, the CIA's own inspector general later found that "the Agency had no intelligence evidence that Cubans in significant numbers could or would join the invaders."⁸⁹

Since Bissell felt, rather bizarrely, "it wouldn't have seemed sensible to have planned the later stages," the only fallback option in the event of a successful Cuban attack on the rebels' beachhead was the one left over from the old Trinidad Plan: to retreat into the Escambray Mountains for protracted guerrilla warfare. When briefed about the change of landing site to the Bay of Pigs, the operation's propaganda chief, David Phillips, blurted out: "But it's too far from the mountains." Indeed, to reach those mountains from the Bay of Pigs, the rebels would have to hack their way through fifty miles of dense mangrove swamp and then cross Cienfuegos Bay by bridge or boat. But there was no bridge. There were no boats. In a later interview,

Bissell admitted: “I think all of us committed the error of saying ‘there is always the guerrilla option’ without planning it.” To address this fundamental flaw, there was, as the CIA operations chief Jacob Esterline put it, an “unstated assumption . . . that once the beachhead was established, the U.S. would have the pretext it needed to intervene”—a futile hope that utterly ignored Kennedy’s adamant opposition to any overt American role in the invasion.⁹⁰

Apart from these fatal tactical flaws, the CIA’s strategic supposition that a force of 1,500 exiles could overthrow Castro’s regular army of 32,000 men was based on memories of the successful Guatemala invasion seven years earlier. Complicating any such analogy, the Castro government had already crushed its political opposition, sending several hundred thousand enemies into exile, while rounding up thousands of suspected subversives in the months before the invasion.⁹¹

THE BAY OF PIGS INVASION

In the weeks before the invasion on April 17, 1961, the implicit clash between President Kennedy’s low-key operation and the CIA’s big-bang amphibious landing turned defeat into disaster. On April 7, Castro’s government learned of the impending invasion from a front-page article in the *New York Times* saying that US “experts” were training a Cuban exile army in Florida and Guatemala.⁹² At a press conference on April 12, just five days before the invasion, President Kennedy stated: “I want to say that there will not be, under any conditions, an intervention in Cuba by the United States Armed Forces. . . . The basic issue in Cuba is . . . between the Cubans themselves.”⁹³

Reflecting his desire to conceal any US involvement, Kennedy phoned Bissell on April 14, the day before the first scheduled airstrike, to insist on “minimal” air operations. Consequently, the CIA cut its aerial attack from sixteen to eight rebel aircraft.⁹⁴ On April 15, the Agency’s eight B-26 bombers launched a successful strike on the Cuban Air Force, destroying five aircraft and disabling a dozen more. But eight Cuban aircraft were still operational, including several Sea Fury propeller fighters and three T-33 Shooting Star jet planes armed with rockets and machine guns. To conceal the US role, one of the CIA’s B-26 exile pilots had peeled off from the

attack and landed at Miami airport, claiming he was a Cuban defector who had bombed his own air force. But reporters and Cuban officials pointed out that Castro's B-26s had plexiglass noses while the one on this plane was solid metal. The instant exposé embarrassed the US ambassador at the UN and prompted President Kennedy to inflict a crippling blow on the invasion plans by canceling a second round of air strikes just hours before the landing.⁹⁵

In the darkness before midnight on April 16, a massive CIA armada approached the Cuban coast forty miles from the Bay of Pigs—seventeen ships loaded with 1,300 men, five tanks, trucks, machine guns, mortars, and ammunition. Just past midnight on April 17, the Cuban exiles, led by their commander, Manuel Artime, landed at the three target beaches about sixteen miles apart, while another 170 paratroops jumped just after sunrise. Right from the start, however, Cuban militia at Red Beach spotted the invasion force and opened fire while radioing Havana with news of the invasion. Instead of the empty beaches that the CIA had expected, the exiles had landed in the middle of a major construction site guarded by Cuban soldiers.⁹⁶

At 3:15 a.m., just two hours after the rebels reached shore, Castro was awakened in Havana and ordered an all-out counterattack. In a daylong air battle, the Cuban Air Force, at the cost of two aircraft, brought down four of the CIA's B-26 bombers and eliminated two of the big cargo ships—blowing up the *Rio Escondido* along with much of the rebels' ammunition, while grounding the *Houston*. The two surviving freighters retreated beyond the reach of Cuban air power, ending up over a hundred miles away loaded with ammunition they could not deliver.⁹⁷

For the next three days, a pitched battle raged around the beach as rival aircraft exchanged fire while Castro personally led twenty-five thousand Cuban troops, armed with Soviet T-34 tanks, in slowly crushing the rebel defenses and driving them back to the beachhead. On April 19, President Kennedy relented by ordering six unmarked US Navy jets from the carrier *USS Essex* to provide cover for the CIA's B-26 bombers flying from Nicaragua. But Bissell, reflecting his lack of military experience, forgot to check the time zones. So, the rebel B-26 bombers arrived exactly an hour earlier than the Navy aircover. Two bombers were shot down and a third was badly damaged, effectively eliminating rebel airpower—the critical factor, Castro himself believed, for the invasion's failure.⁹⁸

Dying from lethal fire as the Cuban Army closed in on their beachhead, the rebels ran out of ammunition just three days after their landing. Almost all the survivors then surrendered en masse. But several dozen led by Manuel Artime escaped and tried to trek through the mangrove swamps to reach the Escambray Mountains. After thirteen days of hunger, thirst, and sheer misery, they were finally forced to surrender, highlighting the absurdity of the CIA's fallback plan.⁹⁹

OPERATION MONGOOSE

In the aftermath of that utter disaster, repercussions in Washington were surprisingly few. Although the CIA itself retained its privileged position at the apex of the intelligence community, the careers of the operation's principal organizers never recovered.

Instead of another overseas posting, Howard Hunt was relegated to a CIA domestic desk engaged in the dreary task of monitoring and manipulating US mass media. Desperate to move on, he pounded out eight espionage novels in just four years that somehow failed to make his fictional American spy Peter Ward a media icon to rival the British James Bond. After resigning from the CIA in 1970, Hunt led President Richard Nixon's secret team that won instant notoriety by breaking into the Democratic Party headquarters in Washington's Watergate complex. Standing before the judge at his sentencing for that crime, his legal bills having climbed beyond a million dollars, Hunt described himself as "alone, nearly friendless, ridiculed, disgraced, destroyed as a man."¹⁰⁰

Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell were eased out of the CIA and used their retirements to write exculpatory accounts of their Agency service. In his sole reference to the Bay of Pigs, Dulles rejected the idea that the invasion plan counted on "a spontaneous uprising of the unarmed population." In his book, Bissell admitted that, in planning the Cuban invasion he relied on his old Yale buddy Tracy Barnes, whose "agreement gave me more confidence in my views," while excluding Richard Helms, a more experienced covert operator. Such uncritical advice led Bissell to design a two-part plan in which the "overthrow of Castro militarily was one option; having him incapacitated or eliminated was another." The latter option was outsourced to the mafia, though Bissell, as a Groton and Yale

man, “had no desire to become personally involved” with such distasteful people.¹⁰¹ As for the mafioso in question, after testifying in 1978 about trying to kill Castro, Santo Trafficante continued his involvement in Florida’s illegal gambling rackets from his modest Tampa home until his death from heart disease in 1987.¹⁰²

Official assessments of the failure focused narrowly on tactical issues. In its most critical finding, a board of inquiry headed by General Maxwell Taylor said: “By about November 1960, the impossibility of running Zapata as a covert operation under [the] CIA should have been recognized and . . . the project should have been abandoned.”¹⁰³ Years later after his retirement, the CIA’s inspector general, Lyman Kirkpatrick, argued that the successful Iran and Guatemala coups had fostered a “mystique by which you could use a clandestine organization to neatly and cheaply remove most any dictator you wished.”¹⁰⁴ Only former president Eisenhower grasped the full implication of the disaster, telling President Kennedy in words whose wisdom would soon become apparent: “The failure of the Bay of Pigs will embolden the Soviets to do something they would not otherwise do.”¹⁰⁵

Instead of toppling communist Cuba, the invasion allowed the Castro regime to deepen its repression so effectively that it would remain in power, virtually unchallenged, for the next sixty years. In anticipation of an invasion in September 1960, the regime had formed Committees for the Defense of the Revolution that, by 1969, had two million members tasked with surveilling every factory, farm, and neighborhood. In short, the entire CIA operation was nothing less than a military, political, and (as we will see) geopolitical disaster.¹⁰⁶

In August 1961, four months after the debacle, Che Guevara met Kennedy aide Richard Goodwin and suggested a *modus vivendi*. Che offered not to make any political alliance with the East, and said he would even consider curtailing their revolutionary activities abroad. But the president wanted vengeance.¹⁰⁷ Instead of negotiations, Kennedy authorized \$50 million to oust Castro through Operation Mongoose, which soon made Miami the world’s largest CIA station with six hundred officers, fifteen thousand Cuban exile assets, and the third-largest navy in the Caribbean.¹⁰⁸

That November, President Kennedy appointed General Edward Lansdale, the CIA’s former man on the spot in Manila and now the Pentagon’s chief of special operations, head of Operation Mongoose with the impossible task of overthrowing Castro within a year. By February

1962, Lansdale had drafted plans for dozens of anti-Castro initiatives involving sabotage, psywar, and assassination, which were supposed to culminate, that October, in a triumphant “touchdown play.”¹⁰⁹ Among the operation’s many bizarre schemes, Lansdale’s “Elimination by Illumination” project proposed that a US submarine would fire star shells in the night sky above Havana on All Souls’ Day, signaling the Second Coming of Christ and Castro’s imminent downfall.¹¹⁰ However, without a skilled anthropologist like former Philippine comrade Charles Bohannon to refine Lansdale’s trademark combination of culture and psywar, his Cuban schemes soon became more comical than lethal.

Meanwhile, the CIA station in Miami began sending fast boats for sabotage along the Cuban coast, burning sugarcane fields and blowing up buildings. After seven months of such attacks, on October 4 Attorney General Robert Kennedy insisted that the president wanted a maximum effort, prompting Lansdale to assure him that more raids were already planned. Just two weeks later, however, the start of the Cuban missile crisis forced the suspension of most Mongoose operations and led to its disbandment within a year.¹¹¹ By the time the operation shut down, an internal CIA memo noted that “practically everyone at the operating level agrees that Lansdale has lost his value.” On November 1, 1963, the day a CIA-led coup toppled his old Saigon comrade President Ngo Dinh Diem, Lansdale himself was forcibly retired from the Pentagon and sent home to write his sanitized memoirs.¹¹²

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs operation, President Kennedy’s harsh anti-Castro rhetoric convinced Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev that “a new invasion was inevitable, that it was only a matter time.” In May 1962, desperately searching for a way to save Cuba so it could become “a torch blazing in the night,” Khrushchev realized that “the solution presented itself: the United States had surrounded the Soviet Union with its military bases and placed its missiles all around our country.” In effect, Khrushchev would respond in kind. Starting on July 4, Soviet ships made 183 voyages to Cuba carrying forty-two thousand Soviet soldiers and 230,000 tons of material, including sixty medium-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear

weapons. The US might destroy most of those missiles, but, said Khrushchev, “it would be enough if . . . even one tenth of the missiles we installed . . . could be used to hit New York with one or two nuclear warheads.”¹¹³

The Cuban missile crisis began on October 14, 1962, when an American U-2 spy plane flying over the island photographed the newly built installations and CIA photo analysis revealed them to be launchers for Soviet rockets capable of striking targets across the United States. Starting on October 16, Kennedy’s ad hoc Executive Committee met continuously for the next seven days until they had reduced all the possible strategic options to just two: either impose a naval quarantine of Cuba or launch an air attack to destroy the missile sites. In a television address on October 22, President Kennedy announced “a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba” and stated that any attack from that island would produce “a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.” That decision set the clock ticking for five dramatic days as the two superpowers danced at the brink of nuclear war before pulling back through diplomatic concessions.¹¹⁴

At the same time he delivered that confrontational television address, Kennedy also wrote Khrushchev privately expressing his willingness “to find, through peaceful negotiation, a solution to any and all problems that divide us.”¹¹⁵ After the US Navy had turned back several Soviet freighters on October 24 and 25, Castro telegraphed Khrushchev urging him to launch a preemptive “thermonuclear blow” on the US—a demand that the Chinese communist leadership in Beijing backed strongly. Instead, Khrushchev wrote Kennedy urging him to avoid “the catastrophe of thermonuclear war” and proposing that, if the US would declare that it “will not invade Cuba with its forces,” then the reason for Soviet weapons and military specialists in Cuba “would disappear.”¹¹⁶

On the next day, October 27, tensions escalated after a U-2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba and Kennedy’s advisers made plans to attack the island. But Khrushchev wrote again to propose a different deal: the Soviet Union would remove its nuclear-armed missiles from Cuba and, in exchange, the US would withdraw its “analogous” nuclear-armed Jupiter missiles from Turkey, which bordered the Soviet Union.¹¹⁷ Publicly, Kennedy ignored the Russian leader’s letter and replied to his first offer instead, agreeing “to give assurances against an invasion” if the Soviets

would withdraw their missiles from Cuba. That evening, however, Attorney General Robert Kennedy met privately with Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to say, as he later recalled the conversation, that “President Kennedy had been anxious to remove those missiles from Turkey and Italy for a long period of time,” and once this crisis was over, “those missiles would be gone.”¹¹⁸

Both sides honored the bargain. On October 28, the last day of the crisis, Radio Moscow promised to “dismantle the arms . . . , and to crate them and return them to the Soviet Union.” Six months later in April 1963, the US Jupiter missiles in Italy and Turkey were dismantled, although all the White House officials privy to the concession would lie and deny the existence of any such “deal” for decades to come. Building on that cooperation, the superpowers soon concluded a Limited Test Ban treaty, which restricted their atomic tests and initiated nuclear disarmament negotiations that would continue to the end of the Cold War.¹¹⁹

Once tensions with Moscow were resolved, the Kennedy White House quickly reached a diplomatic entente with the Castro government. Just ten days after a presidential emissary had paid \$53 million in goods for the release of the 1,200 surviving Cuban rebels, President Kennedy spoke before a boisterous crowd of forty thousand Cuban Americans at Miami’s Orange Bowl. After reviewing the brigade’s survivors and accepting their battle flag, the president promised the cheering crowd: “I can assure you that this flag will be returned to this brigade in a free Havana.”¹²⁰

ASSESSING CIA OPERATIONS

In geopolitical terms, the CIA operations in Cuba and Guatemala did lasting damage to the US position in the Western Hemisphere. The Cuban revolution convinced Washington, as President Kennedy put it, that “Latin America was the most dangerous area of the world,” requiring rapid intervention to quash anything that looked like communism.¹²¹

In October 1961, just six months after the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy decided that Prime Minister Cheddi Jagan of Guyana was a Marxist and authorized a \$2 million CIA operation to overthrow him. In the run-up to that country’s 1964 elections, the CIA funded riots, strikes, and black propaganda that forced Jagan from power until the close of the Cold

War. Yet when Jagan was elected president in 1992, he worked to promote both human rights and free-market economic reforms as well as repair of the decades of corruption and misrule propagated by his US-backed predecessor.^{[122](#)}

Washington reacted even more strongly to the situation in the Dominican Republic. After watching Batista's brutality spark the Cuban revolution, the CIA became concerned that Rafael Trujillo's thirty-year reign of terror over the Dominican Republic risked a similar revolt. To preclude that possibility, in May 1961, the Agency provided arms for local plotters to gun down the dictator. When a liberal successor, Juan Bosch, threatened to create an opening for left-wing influence, President Lyndon Johnson dispatched twenty-three thousand troops to install a reliable Trujillo acolyte, the autocrat Joaquín Balaguer. For the next twelve years, Balaguer presided over the torture, death, and disappearance of eleven thousand people.^{[123](#)}

In Cuba itself, Fidel Castro would rule the island for forty-five years until he resigned and retired in 2008, leaving behind a Communist Party that still governs the country today. More broadly, the nuclear crisis over Cuba made the superpowers wary of any direct confrontation, prompting them to shift their global rivalry to surrogate warfare in more remote parts of Asia and Africa, with devastating consequences for the countries there that would become Cold War battlegrounds.



Major Mike Hoare, leader of the Stanleyville rescue operation by white mercenaries, Congo, August 1, 1965. (Credit: Don McCullin / Camera Press / Redux)

CHAPTER 8

THE COLD WAR COMES TO AFRICA

In June 1960, a staid independence ceremony at Léopoldville, capital of the Belgian Congo, became a fiery rhetorical duel between two strikingly different views of colonial rule. “The independence of Congo,” said King Baudouin of Belgium, resplendent in a snow-white uniform, “fulfills an undertaking by the genius of King Leopold II, begun by him with a resolute courage and pursued with determination by Belgium. When Leopold II embarked on this great, now consummated undertaking, he did not come to you as a conqueror but as an agent of civilization.” Then, in words that seemed more warning than blessing, he concluded: “It is you, gentlemen, who must now prove we did well to trust in you. Gentlemen, the eyes of the world are trained upon you. May God protect the Congo.”¹

Wearing a black suit with matching bow tie, the Congo’s prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, replied with a stinging condemnation of Belgium’s colonial rule, delivered in a disarmingly calm voice. “We were subjected to contempt, insults, and blows that we endured morning, noon, and evening, because we are Negroes,” he said to a burst of applause from Africans in the audience. “We are proud of this struggle of tears, of fire, and of blood to the depths of our being. For it was a noble and just struggle . . . to put an end to the humiliating slavery which was imposed on us by force. This was our fate during the eighty years of a colonial regime.” In closing words that brought the audience to its feet with a burst of applause, he said: “Long live the fighters of our national liberation. . . . Long live the independent and sovereign Congo.”²

Those words marked Lumumba as a dangerous radical in Western capitals. But they also made him a hero to African leaders still struggling for independence. When Belgian officers murdered Lumumba just seven

months after that historic speech, he became a martyr to many in a continent plundered by a century of colonial rule.

After the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884–85 when Europe's imperial powers claimed great slices of its territory, Africa became the most colonized of all the continents—subjected to fifty years of imperial invasions, harsh exploitation of local labor, and expropriation of prime lands by white settlers. In marked contrast to Southeast Asia's relatively rapid decolonization during the 1950s, European expatriates clung to their African colonies with a sense of superiority captured in the Belgian king's speech. When the Cold War started in 1947, most of Africa's 220 million people were still living in some fifty European colonies, each exhibiting a stark contrast between white wealth and African poverty. Unlike Asia's densely populated colonies and tropical climate, Africa's open spaces and temperate zones attracted waves of European settlement—manifest in the vast plantations of Kenya's White Highlands, the soaring spires of Notre-Dame D'Afrique cathedral in Algiers, and the wide ceremonial boulevards of the Congo's capital, Léopoldville.

Although change came fast in the 1960s, as thirty-five African nations gained their independence, white settler regimes in the southern half of the continent would cling to power and privilege until the very close of the Cold War. The end of empire in Africa also sparked a succession of proxy wars between Moscow and Washington—first in the Congo and then Angola—that dragged on for decades, leaving a still troubling legacy of civil conflict.

THE ALGERIAN WAR

Although Africa's first war of independence was fought in the French colony of Algeria during the 1950s, it remained a colonial conflict that did not become, in any formal sense, part of the Cold War. Yet Algeria's revolution, by its sheer length and ultimate triumph, would be the inspiration for many of the armed struggles that later swept across the continent, embroiling the superpowers in surrogate wars.

If the colonial war in French Indochina was a far-off fire, Algeria was a nearby inferno that would embroil France itself in civil war. Starting in the 1830s, France had conquered and colonized Algeria, making it an attractive

destination for generations of European settlers. By the 1940s, a million white colonists, known as *pieds-noirs*, had occupied 40 percent of its arable land and monopolized all the good jobs, denying the colony's eight million Arabs basic schooling and a decent standard of living.³

Pleas for reform were only met with brutal French repression. In response, a handful of Algerian activists formed the underground National Liberation Front (FLN). In November 1954, they launched the first guerrilla attacks on French military targets across the country, starting a seven-year war that would kill 17,000 French troops and a million Algerians.⁴

With military aid from newly liberated Egypt, the FLN revolt soon spread across the countryside, forcing France to mobilize 400,000 troops and 180,000 Arab militiamen called Harkis. To counter such overwhelming force, the FLN conducted a bold experiment in urban guerrilla warfare by launching the Battle of Algiers in 1956 with a bombing campaign across the capital city that exploded in horrific carnage. In response, the colonial government ordered General Jacques Massu, commander of the French paratroopers there, to crush the revolt by any means. His second-in-command, Colonel Roger Trinquier, France's former man on the spot in Indochina, developed an influential doctrine of tactical torture. "With a Cartesian rationale for the use of torture in revolutionary war," wrote the historian Bernard Fall, Trinquier understood that "torture is the particular bane of the terrorist, just as antiaircraft artillery is that of the airman." During the two-year battle for the city's crowded Arab quarter, the Casbah, the paratroopers tortured suspects at night and dumped their bodies in the desert at dawn—killing over three thousand suspected rebels. These tactics did finally secure the colonial capital, later winning Trinquier renown in military circles when he described them in a 1961 treatise that, as one American security official put it, "influenced a generation of counterinsurgency scholarship." His argument for the imperative of torture would also provide a persuasive model for the CIA's murderous Phoenix Program in Vietnam. But such tactics also alienated public support for the war in France itself, a crucial political factor that eluded Trinquier's Cartesian calculus.⁵

To cut the arms flow to the rebels from neighboring independent Tunisia, the French military constructed the Morice Line, a 460-kilometer electrified fence laced with landmines. As commander of the 3rd Colonial Airborne Regiment, Colonel Trinquier was charged with sealing that border,

prompting the FLN to expend enormous manpower in futile attempts to breach the barrier.⁶

By then, however, the political crisis over that colonial war in France itself overwhelmed any progress on the battlefield. Returning to Paris, a former colonial governor organized a coup d'état to install General Charles de Gaulle as president, thinking he was the only one who could save Algeria for France. After an army junta led by generals Jacques Massu and Raoul Salan, aided by Colonel Trinquier, seized power in Algiers in May 1958, paratroopers captured the Mediterranean island of Corsica and prepared to seize Paris should the legislators fail to install de Gaulle as prime minister, which they did only hours before the planned airborne attack.⁷

In a final push for outright victory in Algeria, the French army used a “quadrillage” strategy, dividing the countryside into “squares” for military sweeps against guerrillas hiding in local villages. In another tactical innovation that later proved influential in Vietnam, Colonel Trinquier, as he explained in his book *Modern Warfare*, transformed selected villages into “strategic hamlets” surrounded by “tight, impassable perimeters” of barbed wire, concentrating all rural residents inside these “fortified villages” where their movements were monitored and the “uncontrolled traffic of food” was prohibited to “cut off the enemy’s main sources of supply.” Although the French military had, by 1959, effectively neutralized the guerrillas, de Gaulle grasped that independence was a political inevitability and announced “self-determination” for Algeria.⁸

After a year of fitful talks, the negotiators finally agreed that Algeria would vote on independence within six months.⁹ When 99.7 percent of its voters opted for freedom on July 1, 1962, joyful Algerians celebrated their independence while 1.4 million panicky *pieds-noirs* soon clambered up the gangplanks of ships bound for France—becoming the first of Africa’s many European settler communities to simply evaporate.¹⁰



Colonel Roger Trinquier (right) and Captain Renault (left) planning operations with the French 3rd Colonial Parachute Regiment to surround a rebel band coming from Tunisia, Djebel Onk, Algeria, April 1958. (Credit: Catroux/ECPAD/Défense)

A POSTCOLONIAL EMPIRE CALLED “FRANÇAFRIQUE”

As the Algerian war was winding down in 1960, President de Gaulle realized that the age of empire was ending and decided to free the rest of France’s vast colonial territory, creating fourteen West African nations. Yet his move was far from altruistic. As part of his vision of France as an independent global power, he planned to form a postcolonial sphere in which these new nations would exist in an exclusive French zone, called “Françafrique,” that was to cover a quarter of the continent, effectively removing that vast region from the Cold War’s bipolar competition.

While de Gaulle’s visionary rhetoric made France an independent world power, his trusted adviser Jacques Foccart, whom the French Parliament described as “undoubtedly one of the most mysterious persons in the Fifth Republic,” built a covert apparatus and postcolonial imperium that became the dark underside of the grand Gaullist state. As presidential adviser for Africa under Gaullist governments between 1960 and 1997, Foccart used the state’s covert agency, SDECE (Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage), to maintain a deft control over France’s former African colonies.¹¹ For nearly forty years, Foccart managed this neocolonial confection through a dual strategy of overseeing the 150 agents employed in SDECE’s Africa Section while cultivating a web of personal connections to presidential palaces across West Africa.¹²

Under this postcolonial iteration of informal empire, French troops shuttled in and out of West Africa from a half-dozen military bases, conducting over forty interventions between 1960 and 2002. During the many decades of Françafrique, France’s dozen-plus client states shared autocratic leaders shrouded in vivid personality cults, systemic corruption, state terror, and unblinking French complicity in all of the above. While the rest of Africa suffered 188 coup attempts from 1956 to 2001, the readiness of the French military to quash any putsch provided its protégés with what political scientist Crawford Young called an “effective inoculation against conspiracies.” In this way, Paris ensured the long tenure of compliant dictators like Jean-Bédel Bokassa in the Central African Republic (1966–1979), Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Ivory Coast (1960–1993), and, above all, Omar Bongo in oil-rich Gabon (1967–2009). Apart from its export of raw materials almost exclusively to France, the firm economic foundation for Françafrique lay in its common currency, the CFA franc, which gave the French treasury almost complete fiscal control over those former colonies.¹³



With its full integration into Foccart's network, the exemplary state in Françafrique was Gabon, a poor country of five hundred thousand people rich in natural resources. After its official declaration of independence in 1960, the Francophile president Léon M'ba protected French interests—forestry concessions, uranium mines, oil fields, and a crucial military base. Seven years later, as M'ba was being treated for cancer in a Paris hospital, Foccart picked Omar Bongo, a French intelligence veteran “with no political base,” as the ailing president's running mate on a ticket that would capture 99.9 percent of the vote, assuring the line of succession to Bongo (though he was still only thirty-one) at the president's death six months later.¹⁴

When political opposition intensified in 1971, Foccart's office dispatched the notorious assassin and mercenary Bob Denard as a “technical adviser” to President Bongo. After opposition leader Germain M'Ba arrived home from the movies one night, the assassin Denard stepped from the shadows and fired fatally, also wounding M'Ba's wife and child.¹⁵ The Foccart network also secured President Bongo's rule by training a new presidential guard and forming a security force, the Société Gabonaise de Services, for the protection of French oil facilities, which provided about half of Gabon's gross domestic product.¹⁶

As Africa's troubled decolonization continued, Denard would become the most famous of the continent's many white mercenaries, often acting as the French man on the spot in sub-Saharan Africa. After serving with the French Marines, joining a police death squad in French Morocco, and doing a year in jail for plotting to kill the French prime minister, Denard spent the next thirty years as a mercenary in a half-dozen African nations—sometimes acting on his own, but most often as an agent of French intelligence.¹⁷

Through rigged elections in 1993, 1998, and 2005, President Bongo clung to power while French officials enabled his graft, making him a principal shareholder in the French Elf-Total oil company and facilitating illicit payments estimated at \$111 million yearly.¹⁸ When he finally died in 2009 after a rule of forty-two years, his son Ali Ben Bongo succeeded him as president, inheriting thirty-three luxury properties in France worth \$190 million and a country with a third of its population living on just two dollars a day.¹⁹ But in August 2023, amid an eruption of coups across the region that marked the fading of France's postcolonial power, Ali Bongo was

toppled by a military coup after one too many rigged elections, ending a dynasty that had lasted nearly six decades.²⁰

By maintaining *Françafrique* as its exclusive imperium for over fifty years, France essentially insulated the vast Francophone region of West Africa from the Cold War, shifting all its tensions to the southern half of the continent—first the Congo and then Angola, with heavy costs for both countries.

THE COLD WAR COMES TO THE CONGO

While President de Gaulle was forming *Françafrique*, the Belgian Congo was descending into chaos. By June 1960, the spectacle of the bloody French exit from Algeria, combined with growing unrest in the Congo, sparked the Belgium government's sudden departure from its colony. But Belgian mining corporations stayed on, determined to preserve their lucrative concessions. As the country plunged into crisis, its sheer size as Africa's second-largest nation with a wealth of minerals (copper, cobalt, diamonds, and uranium) made it a prize worth winning. But the convergence between this bitterly contested decolonization and the Cold War produced seven tumultuous years of extraordinary events—including the torture and execution of the country's first leader, the assassination of the UN's secretary-general, a murderous rampage by foreign mercenaries, and the kidnapping of a former prime minister to preempt his return to power.

Apart from the West's important economic interests there, Congo was, as Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah argued in 1967, the geopolitical key to the entire continent. "Geographically, strategically, and politically," he wrote, "the Congo is the most vital region of Africa. . . . Northwards stands free Africa determined on a free continent. Southwards, Angola . . . stretches to the stronghold of colonial and racial oppression, the Republic of South Africa. . . . Thus, the degree of the Congo's independence will substantially determine the ultimate fate of the whole Continent of Africa."²¹ Its first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, soon antagonized both the US and Belgium by seeking Soviet aid, prompting a protracted CIA intervention to bring that sprawling, tumultuous nation into the Western alliance.

The new nation's path to democracy and development was complicated by a troubled colonial history. Starting in the 1870s, King Leopold II of Belgium had coercively extracted vast amounts of ivory and rubber from a private colony he called the Congo Free State. In the process, his brutal rule killed an estimated ten million people, about half the population, and created an international scandal that forced the Belgian government to take control. During the half-century of Belgian rule, a harsh colonial regime sustained lucrative mines and plantations, but only funded public education to the fourth-grade level. At independence in 1960, a country of fifteen million people had no more than twenty university graduates and no trained engineers, doctors, or military officers. Adding to the new nation's difficulties, the Belgians, fearing what the US State Department called "unprecedented strains" to their economy from the loss of the Congo, were determined to control the country after independence.²²

As freedom neared in May 1960, the Congo held its first national elections, dominated by the man of the hour, Patrice Lumumba, a former postal clerk educated at Methodist mission schools. His Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) was the only political party that garnered nationwide support among the Congo's many ethnic groups. His rival Joseph Kasavubu led the Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO), which had a largely Bakongo ethnic base and was more sympathetic to foreign interests. Since Lumumba's MNC won 33 of the 137 parliament seats and Kasavubu's ABAKO came third with twelve seats, the two forged a coalition with Lumumba as prime minister and Kasavubu as president.²³

Just five days after formal independence in June 1960, the Belgian army chief sparked a mutiny among his African troops by announcing that "for the army, independence equals zero." On July 10, Belgium responded by sending in 1,200 paratroopers, who seized airports, fought with Congolese soldiers, and facilitated a mass flight by sixty thousand of the remaining eighty thousand whites, crippling the government. Just three days later, Kasavubu and Lumumba broke relations with Belgium and, according to CIA station chief Larry Devlin, suggested that they would be forced "to ask for the intervention of the Soviet Union" if the West persisted in its aggression. In the riot's aftermath, the cabinet installed Joseph Mobutu, a former sergeant, as the army's chief of staff with the rank of colonel.²⁴

Adding to the spreading confusion, two southern provinces still under Belgian influence separated from the Republic of Congo. On July 11, Moïse

Tshombe, a cunning politician descended from local royalty and backed by the Belgians, led the secession of the mineral-rich province of Katanga, depriving the Congo of the copper and uranium revenues produced by the Belgian-owned Union Minière de Haut Katanga. From the Katangan capital of Elisabethville, a city of 180,000 in the country's southeastern corner, Tshombe formed an army initially led by Belgian volunteers from the colonial Force Publique. But in January 1961, France's Gaullist government, angling for a share of Congo's minerals, dispatched a contingent of veteran officers led by paratroopers Roger Trinquier and Roger Faulques. Although Belgian intrigues soon forced Trinquier's removal, his deputy Faulques stayed on to lead Katanga's military, winning the respect of other mercenaries as "a ruthless and bold commander." With lavish funding from Union Minière reaching \$40 million annually, Tshombe quickly assembled a formidable force of 15,000 troops led by 600 Belgian officers and 500 white mercenaries, including a detachment of 120 whites commanded by the British mercenary "Mad Mike" Hoare. The second secessionist area was the region of South Kasai, where Albert Kalonji, supported by the Belgian Forminière diamond mining interests, sought to create an ethnic state in that traditional homeland.^{[25](#)}

REPUBLIC OF CONGO, PROVINCES, 1960





To contain the explosive Congo crisis, on July 14, 1960, just two weeks after independence, the U.N. Security Council authorized the removal of all Belgian forces and their replacement by sixteen thousand U.N. peacekeepers. In conducting this complex operation, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld had to contend with conflicting Belgian, Congolese, Soviet, and US interests that initially hampered his efforts to restore order. In such gathering chaos, Lumumba appealed for international assistance. But Washington refused to send any aid, and the U.N. at first hesitated to use its forces to retake Katanga and South Kasai. Denied Western support, Lumumba then accepted military assistance from Moscow—a move that convinced Washington he was a communist.^{[26](#)}

At that critical juncture, the CIA began to play a definitive role in the Congo crisis. On August 11, Lawrence Devlin, the new station chief in Léopoldville, warned Washington that Lumumba was “moving left and commie influence increasing.” Within a week, he had cabled Agency headquarters: “Embassy and Station believe Congo experiencing classic Communist takeover government . . . and there may be little time left in which to take action to avoid another Cuba.”^{[27](#)} On August 26, CIA director Allen Dulles cabled Devlin ordering that Lumumba’s removal be made “a high priority of our covert action.” To execute that order, Dulles gave Devlin a discretionary fund of \$100,000, an unprecedented amount at the time.^{[28](#)}

As Washington and Moscow maneuvered for control amid such a chaotic decolonization process, Devlin became Washington’s man on the spot in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa). As the country plunged into seven years of civil warfare, covert operations would often supersede formal diplomacy, investing Devlin with extraordinary authority. Born in 1922, he attended San Diego State University for two years before serving with the Army in North Africa during World War II. As a PhD student at Harvard after the war, Devlin was recruited for the CIA by Professor McGeorge Bundy, later

national security adviser to President Kennedy. After joining the new agency in 1949 and serving as a junior officer in Brussels, Devlin rose fast to direct the CIA's operations in the Congo for ten critical years—first, as station chief from 1960 to 1967; and, finally, as leader of the Agency's Africa Division from 1971 to 1974.²⁹

Just as Edward Lansdale's success in the Philippines relied on his closeness to Defense Secretary Ramon Magsaysay, so Devlin's local partner was Joseph Mobutu—a poor African who learned French at a Catholic mission school, served as a sergeant in the colonial army, and was promoted to army chief amid the confusion that followed independence. Devlin had first met Mobutu in January 1960 at a round table conference in Brussels that planned Congo's independence, and found him “a strong nationalist, [and] intelligent.” Devlin most likely was already aware of him as a potential asset, since Mobutu resided in Brussels, where he reported to Belgian intelligence agents on Congo's leaders and they probably shared that information with the local CIA station where Devlin worked.³⁰

By August 1960, the once-modest CIA office in Léopoldville had, according to the *New York Times*, “mushroomed overnight into a virtual embassy and miniature war department,” ready to mount what one scholar called “the largest covert operation in the agency's history.” During a flying visit to Washington, Devlin argued for Congo's geopolitical significance, telling CIA director Allen Dulles that Moscow would use Congo to build “an extraordinary power base in Africa,” allowing it to “outflank NATO in Western Europe.”³¹ Determined to block Soviet influence, Washington plunged into a fraught search for stability that would move through four distinct phases over the next seven years.

PHASE ONE: KILLING LUMUMBA

By late August 1960, Moscow had delivered a comparatively small amount of aid—ten Ilyushin air transports, a hundred trucks, and 380 Soviet-bloc advisers—to assist Lumumba's attack on the Belgian-backed secessionists in Kasai Province. Nonetheless, that development redoubled Devlin's determination to maneuver Lumumba out of office. His initial strategy was political. Through parliamentary maneuvers, the CIA chief hoped to win a vote of no-confidence against Lumumba that would allow President

Kasavubu to appoint one of the Belgian-backed senators as the new prime minister. Jumping the gun on Devlin's plan, however, the president dismissed Lumumba on September 5 after his attack on Kasai failed and the defeated troops rioted. Pleading his case before parliament in early September, however, Lumumba's eloquence won him a renewed mandate, making him even more dangerous from Washington's perspective.³²

In the midst of these parliamentary maneuvers, the CIA station chief made contact with Colonel Mobutu, who on September 7 revealed, according to Devlin, "his plans to mount a coup" and asked if the US would support his government.³³

"Lumumba and Kasavubu," Devlin asked, "what happens to them?"

"They'll both have to be neutralized," Mobutu replied bluntly.

Devlin reflected for a moment and, in true man-on-the-spot fashion without any authority from Washington, offered his hand, saying: "I can assure you the United States will recognize a temporary government."

"The coup," Mobutu replied, "will take place within a week. But I will need five thousand dollars to provide for my senior officers."

Devlin delivered the funds the next day at a meeting where Mobutu detailed his plans to seize the radio station, announce a new government, and close the Soviet embassy.³⁴ In what Devlin called "an exciting moment," Mobutu's bloodless coup unfolded on September 14, removing Lumumba from power after just eighty-eight days in office. But Mobutu, on Devlin's advice, kept Kasavubu as acting president to lend legitimacy to his coup group.³⁵

At first, Lumumba was only confined to his home, surrounded by loyal soldiers and UN bodyguards, thus remaining free to mobilize support that undercut any government established by Mobutu's coup. After facing sharp criticism at the UN for supporting the US and Belgium, Secretary-General Hammarskjöld and his new special representative to the Congo adopted a more activist stance, protecting Lumumba and calling on Belgium to remove its mercenary troops from Katanga and South Kasai. On September 25, with Lumumba circulating freely around Léopoldville to build support, the *New York Times* reported: "Patrice Lumumba will make a spectacular comeback within two or three days."³⁶

Back in Washington, however, the White House Special Group, which directed CIA covert operations, decided to block Lumumba's return to

power by backing a Mobutu dictatorship. “It is in our interest,” read the group’s minutes, “to support Mobutu as a counterbalance to Lumumba. . . . Finally it is recommended that authorization be granted . . . to bring about a de facto government of the Congo under Mobutu and convince him of the advantages of remaining in the position of a ‘strong man’ behind the government avoiding an overt role.” To that end, Mobutu should “be assured of adequate funds to maintain control over troops” and given “a personal subsidy . . . to insure his continued cooperation.”³⁷

To implement that strategy, Devlin developed a close relationship with Mobutu, whom he called “one of the most courageous men I have ever met.” Throughout the months of continuing crisis, Devlin breakfasted several times a week at Mobutu’s villa overlooking the Congo River. There, he recalled, “we talked easily in a friendly, open way. . . . Mobutu used me as a sounding board for our government’s reaction to his policies.” The CIA station chief also worked closely with key cabinet ministers, known as the Binza group, hosting them at his home for dinner twice weekly and, he said, “providing them with advice and guidance while obtaining intelligence on their plans.”³⁸

On September 19, CIA chief of covert operations Richard M. Bissell Jr. cabled Devlin to expect a visit by “Joe from Paris”—who was, in fact, CIA scientist Sidney Gottlieb coming to the Congo to deliver a toothpaste tube with enough botulinum poison, masked by polio virus, to kill Lumumba. Walking to his car near the embassy one day, Devlin was followed by a man whom he recognized by a rolled-up copy of *Paris Match* magazine in his left hand.

“I am Joe from Paris,” the man said.

“Let’s talk,” Devlin replied, and drove him to a nearby CIA safe house.

“They want you to assassinate Lumumba,” the man said, “and I have some things which will help you accomplish your effort.”

“Jesus Christ, isn’t this unusual? Whose instructions are these?” Devlin asked.

“The president,” the man replied.

“President Eisenhower?” Devlin asked.

“Yes,” the man said, “President Eisenhower has requested.”

Knowing his refusal would lead to an immediate transfer, Devlin dissimulated and said: “I would look into it and see what could be done.”

But unable to penetrate Lumumba's tight UN security, Devlin used his autonomy as a man on the spot to lock the poison in his safe while actively exploring several alternative scenarios for killing Lumumba, even flying two Agency assassins to Léopoldville for the job.³⁹

During a thunderstorm on November 27, however, Lumumba slipped past his guards and tried to escape to Stanleyville (now Kisangani) in eastern Congo, which was controlled by his supporters. With CIA assistance, however, Mobutu quickly arrested him. When the government decided, on January 14, 1961, to ship Lumumba to certain death in secessionist Katanga, Devlin delayed notifying Washington, which might have objected since the inauguration of John F. Kennedy, a liberal who had campaigned on repeated promises to honor the anti-colonial "aspirations of the African people," was just days away. On January 17, Mobutu's soldiers flew Lumumba to Katanga, where he was executed by a firing squad led by a Belgian police officer.⁴⁰

Adding to the Congo's problems, a Lumumba supporter named Antoine Gizenga rallied followers in Stanleyville, Lumumba's regional base and the largest city in eastern Congo, to form yet another separatist government, which was recognized by China, Egypt, and the Soviet Union. After receiving some foreign aid, Gizenga's leftist regime began extending its influence westward into Mobutu's territory, creating a crisis in central Congo that presented a new challenge for Washington.⁴¹

PHASE TWO: ENDING REGIONAL SECESSION

During the next phase of US intervention, the chief challenge facing the Congo government was regaining control over the secessionist provinces of Kasai, Orientale, Kivu, and, above all, Katanga. With Lumumba's threat removed, the US started supplying the coalition government with planes, pilots, and training to fight those regional rebels.

With funding from CIA chief Devlin, the Binza group backed Kasavubu as president and supported General Mobutu in building a base of support within the military. To assure an acceptable successor to Lumumba, in August 1961 Devlin bribed the parliament into marginalizing Gizenga's allies and appointing a pro-Western prime minister, Cyrille Adoula, a labor leader who had "close ties" to CIA asset Irving Brown of the AFL-CIO.

Simultaneously, the CIA backed the Binza group in strengthening Mobutu's control over the military and building up Congo's new Sûreté secret police under Victor Nendaka, whom one CIA operative described as "a mean, brutal man who shaped up the security service and kept . . . governments loyal to Mobutu."⁴²

Acting on a UN resolution in February 1961 to remove all mercenaries from Congo, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld condemned Tshombe's separatist state in Katanga along with the Europeans sustaining the secession. In August, the local UN representative, Conor Cruise O'Brien, ordered an attack on the white mercenaries occupying the provincial capital at Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) that resulted in dozens of civilian deaths. A month later, the French mercenary Roger Faulques led some three thousand Katangan troops in a retaliatory attack on the UN detachment of 155 Irish soldiers at Jadotville, the Union Minière headquarters, forcing their surrender after a spirited defense that killed three hundred attackers. A day later, Secretary-General Hammarskjöld was flying to Katanga to negotiate a cease-fire with Tshombe when his plane crashed, likely shot down by a Belgian mercenary pilot flying for the Katangans.⁴³

Under the new secretary-general, U Thant, UN forces then launched an offensive that captured Elisabethville, occupied the headquarters of Union Minière at Jadotville, and marched into Katanga's last rebel bastion, Kolwezi, in January 1963, ending the secession and allowing for the expulsion of the mercenaries. At that moment of triumph General Mobutu, Congo's de facto leader, made a state visit to Washington, where he was honored by a photo-op in the Rose Garden with President Kennedy, who said, "General, if it hadn't been for you . . . the Communists would have taken over."⁴⁴

Success in Katanga inspired advances against the remaining rebel provinces. In December 1961, the leader of Kasai's secession, Kalonji, was arrested while traveling to the capital city of Kinshasa and, within nine months, UN and Congolese forces occupied Kasai itself, ending that province's secession. Although the regional leader in the east, Antoine Gizenga, was imprisoned in early 1962, other Lumumba loyalists remained in control of much of eastern Congo, providing fuel for the next fire. In the following two years, 1964 and 1965, as Soviet arms shipments arrived, the eastern half of the country erupted in fighting.⁴⁵

In late 1963, Lumumba's former interior minister, Christophe Gbenye, led a major revolt by the Simba movement, whose members mixed indigenous messianism with a dash of Marxism. With "Long Live Lumumba!" as their battle cry, the Simbas advanced from Albertville (now Kalemie) on Lake Tanganyika toward Stanleyville, capturing that city and a quarter of the country by August 1964. Adding to the crisis, Pierre Mulele, a former education minister under Lumumba who had trained as a guerrilla in China, formed a movement farther west that soon controlled a substantial amount of territory. As the crisis mounted in July, President Kasavubu dismissed his ineffectual prime minister and, in what one historian called "an astonishing development," appointed the charismatic (if corrupt) Moïse Tshombe. Not only was Tshombe backed by the Belgian Union Minière company, but he could also command the loyalty of the white mercenaries who had fought for him when he led secessionist Katanga. Since UN peacekeepers had left in June and Congo's army was collapsing, Secretary of State Dean Rusk cabled his Kinshasa embassy on August 6 that Tshombe "should proceed soonest to establish effective gendarmerie-mercenary unit"—prompting the CIA station to fund a new crew of white mercenaries. To move troops across the country's vast distances, the Agency recruited twenty-nine Cuban exiles to pilot an ad hoc air force of fifty-six aircraft, including fighters, helicopters, and five B-26 bombers.⁴⁶

To recruit and lead his mercenaries, Tshombe turned to the controversial commander "Mad Mike" Hoare, a British veteran who had fought in Burma with the famed Chindit commandos during World War II and later moved to South Africa, where he sold used cars. To recruit mercenaries, Hoare advertised in European, Rhodesian, and South African newspapers offering "employment with a difference" and attracting a high proportion, as he put it, of "alcoholics, drunks, booze artists, bums and layabouts." After some winnowing, he formed a force of three hundred recruits from nineteen nations, over half of them racist Rhodesians and South Africans. In Hoare's view, since "no Geneva convention" was applicable in Congo, "you saturated the possible target with fire whether or not you could see movement," making every rifleman "the equivalent of a light machine gunner." So instructed, his men would track a trail of blood across the heart of Africa, with a record of carnage that belied their heroic portrayal in the 1978 Hollywood film *The Wild Geese* starring Roger Moore and Richard Burton.⁴⁷

Not only did the CIA's Larry Devlin fund the mercenaries, but he befriended Hoare, describing him as “well-educated, articulate, a man of tremendous charm [who] proved himself to be a serious and capable soldier”—making a mercenary who boasted about killing ten thousand Africans Washington's man on the spot in eastern Congo.⁴⁸ Amid the confusion, even chaos of decolonization when an empowered imperial agent could descend into simple savagery, Hoare would take pride killing countless African villagers, much as his Dutch counterpart Raymond “the Turk” Westerling had done in Indonesia.

Starting in September 1964, Mike Hoare's mercenaries drove pell-mell for a thousand kilometers across the heart of the country toward Stanleyville in jeeps mounted with machine guns. By hot-rodding through towns while firing off a “hurricane of gunfire,” Hoare's men killed hundreds, routed any Simba guerrillas in their path, and prompted the rebel leaders to threaten the massacre of the three hundred European hostages they held at Stanleyville's Victoria Hotel. That November, under Operation Dragon Rouge, CIA-funded C-130 air transports landed 320 Belgian paratroopers at Stanleyville's airport, where they fought their way into the city to release the surviving Western hostages. Hoare's mercenaries drove into town just in time to loot the shops and rob the banks.⁴⁹

PHASE THREE: THE BATTLE FOR CONGO'S EASTERN PROVINCES

By December 1964, Prime Minister Tshombe's mercenaries had captured most of Orientale Province. But within months the US faced another challenge in the far northeast, where Soviet pilots began flying tons of weapons from Egypt and Algeria into neighboring Sudan while Chinese arms were arriving across Lake Tanganyika from Tanzania. Both were supplying the Simba rebels led by Gbenye, who had proclaimed himself president of a People's Republic of Congo. Relying on white mercenaries to recover the country's northeast, General Mobutu waved his cane at a wall map and told Mike Hoare that his new mission was “sealing off the frontiers of Uganda and Sudan.”⁵⁰

In April 1965, the Cold War truly arrived in Congo when Cuba sent two small expeditions. They would have an outsized impact on Africa through

training the troops of Laurent Kabila, the future president of Congo, and Agostinho Neto, the first leader of an independent Angola. After crossing Lake Tanganyika that April, Che Guevara's column of 128 Afro-Cubans would remain in eastern Congo for seven months, fighting the mercenaries, training the Simba rebels, and collaborating with Kabila, who according to Che had "genuine qualities of a mass leader," but lacked "revolutionary seriousness." Although Cuban leadership contributed to some Simba successes, the rebels' belief in their ritual invulnerability to bullets frequently exposed them to the lethal fusillades of white mercenaries. After months of attacks by the CIA's air force and Mike Hoare's mercenaries, Simba resistance began to weaken and the Cubans retreated back across the lake to Tanzania. "There is no will to fight," Che later said of his Congo comrades, "the leaders are corrupt."⁵¹

At the same time that Che's column was arriving from Tanganyika, a second column of 260 Cubans led by a lesser-known revolutionary, Jorge Risquet, landed at neighboring Congo-Brazzaville, where they were much more successful. Not only did they train several units of Marxist guerrillas who were fighting Portuguese colonials in Angola, but Risquet also managed to quell a coup attempt against the local leftist government without firing a shot. By the time his sixteen-month mission in Brazzaville ended, Risquet had demonstrated the skills that would make him, a decade later, such a formidable leader of Cuba's intervention in Angola.⁵²

As Soviet support for the Simbas began to sputter in mid-1965, the CIA's white mercenaries under Mike Hoare, Bob Denard, and Belgian planter Jean "Black Jack" Schramme were sweeping across Congo's northeast with machine guns blazing from speeding jeeps, in a campaign of carnage that resulted in the slaughter of three thousand in the town of Kindu alone and left countless thousands dead. Adding diplomatic pressure, an African Unity summit in Accra, Ghana, agreed to cut support for the Simba rebels in exchange for President Kasavubu's promise to reduce Congo's reliance on mercenaries. Moreover, Prime Minister Tshombe was ousted in October and left for Belgium, forcing Mad Mike Hoare's return to South Africa. By November 1965, the eastern revolt had faded after CIA swift boats blocked arms shipments across Lake Tanganyika and the last rebels ceased operations. "Killing African nationalists is like killing animals," declared Mike Hoare. "My men and I killed between five and ten thousand

Congolese rebels”—one of the few times Hoare understated his achievements.⁵³

THE FINAL PHASE: CONSOLIDATING GENERAL MOBUTU’S KLEPTOCRACY

Once the revolt in eastern Congo was contained and the Soviet intervention checked, Washington still faced the problem of establishing a viable national government in Kinshasa. With the Tshombe and Kasavubu factions hopelessly deadlocked, in November 1965 General Mobutu seized power once again in a bloodless coup—a development CIA station chief Devlin called “the best possible solution.” Although he denied any prior knowledge of the coup, Devlin would soon give the new regime some critical support. In May 1966, he provided intelligence about a countercoup attempt by four former cabinet ministers conspiring against Mobutu, who promptly had them hanged before a crowd of fifty thousand cheering spectators in a soccer stadium—a spectacle, said one political scientist, that had “a tremendous psychological effect” of silencing any elite opposition.⁵⁴

A more serious threat came from former prime minister Moïse Tshombe, who combined political backing from Belgian mining interests with personal ties to the white mercenaries. To preempt Tshombe’s moves, General Mobutu reduced the mercenaries’ numbers from 650 in late 1966 to some 200 six months later. To cut their funding, in January 1967 he nationalized the Belgian-owned Union Minière, which had long used both Tshombe and the mercenaries for clandestine maneuvers to preserve its concessions. As Tshombe was assembling aircraft and troops for a coup attempt from exile in Spain, Mobutu had him tried for treason in absentia and sentenced to death. In a dramatic denouement on June 30, Jacques Foccart, who was maneuvering to supplant the Belgians, carried off one of the many cunning covert actions that made the French such formidable players in African affairs. As Tshombe was taking off from the Spanish island of Ibiza in an executive jet, a French felon working with “the espionage network of Jacques Foccart, then [French] presidential secretary-general for African affairs,” hijacked the aircraft at gunpoint and ordered it flown to Algeria. There, the Congolese leader was jailed for two years until his death. Just five days after his patron’s kidnapping, the Belgian

mercenary “Black Jack” Schramme launched an abortive attack on Stanleyville to restore Tshombe to power. But the revolt collapsed when Congolese army resistance proved surprisingly strong, forcing Schramme and his 1,200 troops to retreat to eastern Kivu Province. There, he tried to establish “his own little state” in the town of Bukavu. But by November Congolese paratroops, backed by CIA C-130 air transports, pushed Schramme and his last hundred-plus mercenaries into Rwanda, thereby removing the only check on Mobutu’s tightening grip on power.⁵⁵

By late 1967, Mobutu’s coup, combined with the defeat of the Simba revolt in eastern Congo, effectively curtailed the Soviet reach for influence in Central Africa. At a total cost of just \$11.7 million for CIA operations in Congo, Washington had won unchecked control of that sprawling, mineral-rich country.⁵⁶

With Washington’s backing, President Mobutu’s thirty-two-year rule (1965–97) made corruption into a form of governance that came to be termed “kleptocracy.” Compounding a century of Belgian misrule, Mobutu turned government revenues and investment capital into ready cash, tending to his regional base in the north while making regular payments to local warlords and tribal chiefs elsewhere in that vast nation. To sustain his elaborate patronage network, while also stashing some \$6 billion in his overseas bank accounts, Mobutu siphoned off about 50 percent of Congo’s state revenues, along with much of its mineral export income, foreign aid, and private investment.⁵⁷

Despite his regime’s entrenched corruption, US support for Mobutu remained rock solid throughout the Cold War. Feeling its choice was “Mobutu or chaos,” Washington courted him for over thirty years with \$150 million in secret CIA payments, \$230 million in military aid, and a billion dollars in development funds.⁵⁸ After thirty years of sustained looting, the economy collapsed as the average gross domestic product per capita fell from \$600 in 1978 to just \$135 by 1997.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, almost every US president from John F. Kennedy to George H. W. Bush endorsed Mobutu’s misrule with lavish state visits to Washington. Simultaneously, the CIA leveraged this special relationship to make Congo its operational base for covert action against Soviet allies in southern Africa.

THE FIRST AND SECOND CONGO WARS

Congo's cataclysm of violence at the close of the Cold War was, in many ways, the culmination of Mobutu's inept governance and the failed US nation-building that went with it. As Washington's financial support waned and Mobutu's hold on power weakened after the Cold War's end in 1991, the country plunged into a decade of conflict marked by what came to be known as the First and Second Congo Wars. Amid an economic collapse that denied him the cash flow needed to sustain his normal patronage payments to regional bosses, Mobutu's fragile Congolese state simply crumbled. As rebel groups formed on its peripheries, the regime faced a regional revolt in eastern Congo centered in mineral-rich Kivu Province.⁶⁰

Backed by Mobutu's many African enemies, a rebel coalition led by Laurent Kabila, Che Guevara's former comrade, launched the First Congo War in 1996. By sweeping across the country, slowed only by rutted roads and rotten bridges, Kabila's troops advanced relentlessly on Kinshasa as Mobutu's ill-disciplined army simply faded away. As Mobutu was jetting off into exile, where he would soon die of cancer, the respected army chief, General Donatien Mahele, was murdered by the president's loyalists for trying to negotiate the capital's peaceful surrender. Yet within a day and without firing a shot, Kabila led his forces into Kinshasa to become the country's next president.⁶¹

In sad testimony to the continuing impact of Mobutu's misrule, the Second Congo War would become a brutal conflict between President Kabila and some two dozen eastern warlords, many of them backed by Rwanda's wily president, Paul Kagame. From 1998 to 2003, the conflict ravaged eastern Congo, where warring factions competed for minerals and warlord armies, like the notorious M-23 militia, terrorized local populations.⁶²

According to the UN, the rebels extracted \$338 million in gold and rare earth minerals from the Kivu region in 1999 alone, using the funds to sustain their militia. Two years later, the assassination of President Kabila removed the conflict's prime antagonist, allowing his son and successor Joseph Kabila to negotiate an end to the war. By then, the Second Congo War had ravaged the eastern provinces, leaving an estimated 5.4 million people dead and 2 million more displaced. Within three years, warlord violence revived and would continue fitfully for another twenty years. As of 2025, a US-mediated peace accord between Congo and Rwanda was trying

to stop the fighting by armed groups, including the M-23, that were capturing cities and generating millions of refugees forced to survive on meager UN rations.⁶³

THE ASSESSMENT OF AN ALLIANCE

In retrospect, Washington's Cold War alliance with Mobutu left an ambiguous legacy. Not only did the US secure Central Africa, but it also controlled much of Congo's mineral exports. American investors prospered accordingly—notably Maurice Tempelsman, a diamond broker who was “Mobutu's confidant and investment counsellor” and later became famous as Jackie Kennedy's last consort.⁶⁴ Right after retirement from the CIA in 1974, Larry Devlin joined Tempelsman's company and remained his personal representative in Congo for the next thirteen years—a position he used to advise his old friend Mobutu, pass information to the CIA, and shape US policy toward the country in the last years of the Cold War.⁶⁵

But it was the tawdry careers of the CIA's closest Congo allies that raised serious questions about the wisdom of the Agency's tactical expediency. Indeed, Larry Devlin's mercenary comrades ended their careers like latter-day pirates, predators trying to plunder poor island states off Africa's east coast.

After President Ahmed Abdallah led the Comoros Islands in declaring independence from the French in 1975, gun-for-hire Bob Denard gathered his mercenaries for a first coup that toppled Abdallah and then, when his successor proved unacceptable, a second that restored Abdallah to office. Needing a retirement home, Denard converted to Islam and stayed on for eleven years as chief of the five-hundred-strong presidential guard with a \$3 million salary, living on a massive 1,800-acre estate. As the Cold War ended in 1989 and Abdallah was about to dismiss Denard, an unidentified killer, probably acting on Denard's orders, shot the president in his bedroom. Rioters raged about the capital shouting “Assassin! Assassin!” until French paratroopers evacuated him safely to South Africa.⁶⁶ But just six years later, Denard was back for his third coup attempt, landing in the Comoros with thirty-three men in inflatable boats. He had apparently acted without the consent of his usual intelligence patrons, so French troops soon bundled him off to Paris for trial. The court accepted his argument that the

coup was sanctioned by French intelligence, but still sentenced him to four years' imprisonment, which he avoided only because of advanced dementia.⁶⁷

Similarly, in 1981, Larry Devlin's good buddy "Mad Mike" Hoare recruited fifty-five South African mercenaries for an abortive raid on the Seychelles, another small island republic off the coast of East Africa. That secret commando strike came undone when an airport customs officer found weapons during a routine luggage inspection, forcing them to shoot their way out of the terminal and escape in a hijacked aircraft. At his trial for air piracy, a South African judge condemned Hoare as "an unscrupulous man with a highly cavalier attitude to the truth" and sentenced him to ten years' imprisonment.⁶⁸

But the most questionable CIA ally was Mobutu himself. At his death in 1997, the *Washington Post* reported the Congo's per capita income was less than 10 percent of its level in 1960, half the country's children died by the age of five, almost all schools and hospitals had closed, and the country's currency was worthless. The research group Transparency International later reported that Mobutu had stolen half of the \$12 billion in development loans Congo received from the International Monetary Fund, leaving the country with a crippling debt and no development.⁶⁹ As a legacy of Mobutu's thirty years of misrule, in 2008 the Brookings Institution rated Congo as the world's third-weakest state, comparable to Haiti, with an average life expectancy of only fifty-five years, one of the world's worst.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, Algeria had become a dour single-party state and the fourteen nations of Francafrique had achieved a tenuous stability at the cost of strongman rule. But the Congo could not even meet that low bar. To keep the Soviets out of the country, the CIA had backed a kleptocrat who robbed the country of thirty years of economic growth and fostered political instability that became tinder for the Second Congo War, the planet's deadliest armed conflict since World War II. To top it all off, with the end of the Cold War Washington had little reason to mind such a troubled country and turned its back, allowing China to capture the rare earth minerals the US would soon need to fuel its transition to alternative energy.⁷¹

PART TWO

ONE, TWO, MANY VIETNAMS



Communist spy Pham Xuan An holds up his 1965 US press card at his home in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, April 26, 2000. (Credit: AP Photo / Charles Dharapak)

CHAPTER 9

THE VIETNAM WAR

In April 1975, an Air America helicopter packed with fleeing South Vietnamese officials lifted off from the roof of a CIA safehouse in downtown Saigon, the country's capital. Flying above the panicky crowds surging through that city's streets to escape an impending North Vietnamese attack, the chopper headed out across the South China Sea and landed on a US aircraft carrier. There, sailors were clearing the deck by pushing such million-dollar machines overboard. A photo of those passengers climbing that safehouse's spindly rooftop ladder to the helicopter became one of the most iconic images of the Vietnam War. But the camera could not capture the irony of that historic moment. The last passenger to board that flight was the former head of Saigon's secret police, responsible for killing thousands of communists. Escaping certain death, he had been escorted to that building by the city's top communist spy, Hanoi's man on the spot in Saigon.¹

During those fateful days, the United States suffered a searing defeat in South Vietnam that would force a fundamental realignment in its strategy for fighting the rest of the Cold War. After all, Washington's intervention there with five hundred thousand troops who suffered 58,000 deaths from 1965 to 1972 had proven profoundly divisive. It devastated military morale and sparked massive anti-war protests that made any overseas deployment of major combat forces inconceivable for the foreseeable future. After the failure of conventional infantry operations in Vietnam, Washington would shift its foreign interventions to the covert warfare tactics that the CIA had developed in Laos during those same years.

To understand that extraordinary commitment of American forces, you need to remember that this was not just a war over a modest-sized country called "South Vietnam." At one level, that conflict seemed little more than a civil war among Vietnam's 32 million people, evenly divided between the

communist North and nominally democratic South. More broadly, however, the conflict represented a major phase in the larger Cold War. After the 1962 Cuban missile crisis showed the superpowers the risks of any direct confrontation in the North Atlantic, Moscow and Washington shifted to seemingly less dangerous proxy warfare in remote locations that would then bear the brunt of devastating battles—in Indochina from 1962 to 1975, then in Central America, Central Asia, and southern Africa during the Cold War's final phase from 1975 to 1990.

Viewed strategically, the American war in Indochina was divided into two main domains—conventional infantry combat directed from the US military headquarters in Saigon, and the CIA's clandestine struggle to destroy the communists' underground government in the villages of South Vietnam, while simultaneously waging a secret war in Laos. By deploying infantry and airpower that represented half the entire American military, the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam won every major battle and seemingly secured the country sufficiently by 1972 for South Vietnam's army, the ARVN, to assume the burden of battle. But in the process, the US lost the covert war in a devastating fashion and thereby the larger Vietnam War, suffering a military and moral defeat that weakened its position in the wider Cold War.

Simply put, North Vietnam's efficient counter-intelligence work defeated the CIA's attempt to uproot the Viet Cong (VC) communist underground in the South. According to a CIA estimate, by war's end the VC had infiltrated thirty thousand communist spies into every facet of Saigon's security services, making this "by far the biggest agent network in the history of espionage."² Some of those agents proved to be extraordinarily skilled operatives, particularly a *Time* magazine reporter named Pham Xuan An who would become Hanoi's man on the spot in Saigon, providing North Vietnam with intelligence critical for most of its key military victories. To root out the VC's underground government, the CIA had built the Phoenix Program, a massive intelligence apparatus made up of computers, torture-interrogation centers, and mercenaries that would kill forty-one thousand supposed communists—an effort the VC penetrated and neutralized. In retrospect, the ability of communist counter-intelligence to check the CIA's clandestine intelligence apparatus played a critical role in Hanoi's ultimate victory.

SINKING INTO SOUTH VIETNAM'S QUAGMIRE

That protracted conflict in South Vietnam would span two full decades of the Cold War. In 1951, Washington first became involved in Vietnam by providing some 75 to 80 percent of the funds for the French colonial forces fighting against communist-led Vietnamese guerrillas there. In the aftermath of the Geneva Accord that ended the first Indochina War in 1954, French forces withdrew and the communists established their new state in North Vietnam. In the southern half of the country, however, Washington's man on the spot, CIA operative Edward Lansdale, manipulated the situation to persuade Washington that his man, Premier Ngo Dinh Diem, could build a viable anti-communist state. After his election as president of a new republic in 1955, the US funded Diem's nation-building program, training South Vietnam's new army, the ARVN, to fight the battle-hardened northern forces. From 1955 to 1957, Diem's ruthless secret police, headed by the devout anti-communist Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, also launched an unrestrained campaign of repression, slaughtering an estimated five thousand communists and arresting 180,000 former guerrillas—prompting Hanoi to approve a revival of armed resistance by its southern adjunct, the Viet Cong (VC).³

As the VC revolt escalated in 1960 and 1961, Washington responded with a special warfare program to train ARVN forces in counterinsurgency. To counter what the president called “wars by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, and assassins” with “a wholly new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force,” the Kennedy administration dispatched helicopters and armored personnel carriers to improve the ARVN's combat mobility and also launched what was called the Strategic Hamlet Program. Influenced by reading Colonel Roger Trinquier's positive account of the “strategic hamlet” during the Algerian war in his book *Modern Warfare*, Diem's brother and security chief Ngo Dinh Nhu forcibly concentrated 8.7 million Vietnamese peasants in 7,205 crowded, hastily assembled strategic hamlets—giving them good reason to oppose the government.⁴

Significantly, the key Saigon official charged with implementing this scheme, Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, was in fact a secret communist agent who pushed the program at “breakneck speed in order to estrange South Vietnam's peasants.” As program supervisor in 1962, Colonel Thao also placed the fortified villages in areas with a strong VC presence, allowing the guerrillas access to supplies and identification cards that increased their

mobility. When Defense Secretary Robert McNamara made a forty-eight-hour flying visit to Saigon that May, Colonel Thao was his guide on a tour of those strategic hamlets, prompting the secretary to say that he was “tremendously encouraged” by the progress in the “pacification” of the South.⁵

The dismal denouement of the war’s first phase came at the battle of Ap Bac. In January 1963, some 1,200 ARVN soldiers, backed by thirteen armored personnel carriers and fifteen US helicopters, attacked the village of Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta. Surprised by stiff resistance there, the ARVN suffered about two hundred casualties against a smaller force of lightly armed VC guerrillas who had been warned of the attack by Hanoi’s master spy, the journalist Pham Xuan An. Right after the battle An, in his role as a Reuters reporter, flew over the village in a US helicopter to file a dispatch describing how the guerrillas had shot down five of those helicopters, killing at least one American pilot and defeating 1,200 ARVN troops.⁶

By then, Diem had used American aid to build an authoritarian state that crushed domestic opposition while mismanaging the counterinsurgency campaign. Concerned about possible coups, Diem played politics with his military—promoting officers on the basis of political loyalty while inadvertently crippling the ARVN’s combat capabilities. By mid-1963, public opposition to his repressive regime erupted in Saigon in what came to be known as “the Buddhist crisis,” exemplified by the spectacular self-immolation of the venerable monk Thich Quang Duc.⁷

The Kennedy administration’s doubts about Diem grew throughout the summer of 1963, while the new US ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, had already made up his mind. The president’s powerful brother Ngo Dinh Nhu had, said Lodge, “lost his mind. He was taking an enormous amount of opium.” But Diem refused to dismiss him. Deciding that he “had no choice,” Lodge began organizing a coup of his own with the help of the CIA’s new man on the spot in Saigon, Lucien Conein.⁸

VIETNAM WAR, 1964-75





Born in France and raised in Kansas City, Conein had parachuted into Vietnam's northern mountains in 1945 with a unit of the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, that trained communist guerrillas to fight the Japanese. After operating undercover in Berlin, where his CIA boss described him as “a horrible man” and “a total gangster,” Conein returned to Vietnam with Colonel Lansdale's CIA team in 1954, conducting sabotage when the communists occupied Hanoi during the cease-fire that ended French colonial rule there. Assigned to the CIA's Saigon station in 1962, Conein's tough-guy persona and unique bicultural fluency allowed him extraordinary autonomy in Saigon's covert netherworld—consorting with the city's Corsican gangsters and cultivating South Vietnamese generals who, like his friend Tran Van Don, were veterans of the French army.⁹

As the Viet Cong revolt spread, the CIA began to harbor growing doubts about Diem's leadership. By August 1963, its Far East Staff in Washington was arguing that Diem's continued rule “would make a communist victory virtually inevitable,” and recommended seeking “the cooperation of at least a few key Vietnamese generals . . . with a view toward mounting a coup at the earliest possible date.”¹⁰ Aware that General Don, the army's chief, was also dismayed by Diem's leadership, Conein began weeks of secret meetings with him at a Saigon dentist's office to plot the president's overthrow. That November, the ARVN's generals launched a one-day coup that did indeed capture the presidential palace and force Diem to flee to a safe house in Saigon's sister city, Cholon. After the junta promised Diem safe passage out of the country, Conein, who turned up in coup headquarters carrying \$42,000 in cash that he distributed without any accounting, told the generals that a flight was “not in the books” since they had no plane and no place to send him. Instead of arranging a flight, the generals dispatched an assassin. When a cavalcade carrying Diem and his brother Nhu stopped at a railroad crossing en route to the airport, the assassin pumped both with bullets and stabbed the corpses as a coup de

grâce. At first, the generals insisted Diem had died by suicide, but Conein spared them public embarrassment by pointing out that as a devout Catholic, Diem would never have taken his life.¹¹

Just as the CIA's Edward Lansdale had maneuvered Washington into selecting Diem as its Saigon surrogate in 1954, so Conein had now influenced that ARVN coup group in ways assuring Diem's death—making those two men on the spot seminal in shaping Washington's policy in South Vietnam.

In the two-year transition that followed Diem's death, the US shifted from advising Saigon's soldiers to actual combat. As the Viet Cong's guerrillas expanded and North Vietnamese troops started coming through the mountains of Laos into South Vietnam on what came to be known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Saigon's military, focused on coups and countercoups, proved incapable of containing the communist threat. Meanwhile, South Vietnam's politics plunged into months of crippling instability, from which a military junta led by the uninspiring General Nguyen Van Thieu emerged.¹²

Searching for solutions, Ambassador Lodge brought retired CIA operative Edward Lansdale back to Saigon in August 1965 as a senior adviser, though with a military junta tightening its grip on power, his advocacy of democratic reforms fell on deaf ears at the US embassy. One White House aide visiting Saigon in late 1967 described Lansdale as “a public nuisance who has been waiting around in an alcoholic haze for the Second Coming of Magsaysay.”¹³

To his credit, however, Lansdale's team was the only American unit investigating the systemic corruption that had crippled Saigon's pacification effort. In early 1966, his team reported that “corruption here is a fact of life and it reaches very high”—indeed as high as President Nguyen Van Thieu's close ally and commander of the IV Corps military region, General Dang Van Quang, who collected lucrative kickbacks for forming local militia units. In his frequent rural forays, Lansdale's aide Daniel Ellsberg found that the removal of drunken, incompetent district chiefs in key areas of the III Corps region surrounding Saigon was impossible since they had purchased their positions from the ARVN's chief of staff, General Cao Van Vien. From such reports, Lansdale concluded that almost all the country's province chiefs were “guilty of graft, corruption, incompetence, and a complete lack of understanding of the nature of guerrilla warfare.” The

government, he claimed, controlled only 2 percent of the country and, he added, even “Saigon was in the jaws of a gigantic pincer like a lobster.”¹⁴

Faced with the near-certain collapse of the ARVN, Washington began to intervene by stages in 1964 and 1965 to check Hanoi’s aggression in the South. After covert raids and bombing failed to deter North Vietnam, the first American ground troops came ashore at Da Nang in March 1965, initially for defensive duties guarding US air bases. Just three months later, however, President Lyndon Johnson ordered the first offensive operations by American infantry—a decision that marked the start of the Vietnam War.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON’S WAR

From 1965 to 1968, the war would rage without restraint, marked by bloody ground combat and escalating air operations. At its start, the head of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General William Westmoreland, devised a three-stage, three-year strategy to move his forces from the brink of defeat to outright victory. First, by late 1965, he would have sufficient troops in-country “to halt the losing trend.” By early 1966, US forces would attack the enemy in “high priority areas,” allowing the “reinstitution of rural construction activities.” Finally, by late 1967, his military would accomplish the “defeat and destruction of the remaining enemy forces and base areas”—in a word, victory.¹⁵

For Westmoreland, the key to success was the critical “crossover” that was to come when the war of attrition he was waging would destroy more men than Hanoi could replace via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. To inflict such casualties, the general devised unique tactics of “search and destroy,” requiring American troops to draw the enemy into combat in which superior US firepower from aircraft and artillery could grind the Viet Cong down in that war of attrition.

In the eyes of MACV and the Pentagon, the war’s first stage went according to plan, piling success upon success. By the end of 1965, Westmoreland had 184,000 men in-country, many of them air mobile thanks to the war’s new weapon, the combat helicopter.

In September 1965, General Lewis Walt ordered his 3rd Marine Amphibious Force out of its base at Chu Lai to attack a Viet Cong regiment on the Batangan Peninsula near the city of Da Nang. After amphibious

landings on the peninsula, the two Marine battalions trapped the guerrillas between them with no escape route, killing seven hundred and destroying their unit.¹⁶ Clearly, if the US military could similarly find and fix the rest of the enemy forces, its superior firepower would destroy them.

In another major battle with a lasting impact on its strategy, the US Army fought against three North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiments in the Ia Drang Valley, located in the dense, mountain jungle of South Vietnam's Central Highlands near the city of Pleiku. To counter an apparent NVA offensive, in October 1965 Westmoreland deployed the 1st Air Cavalry, one of his new "air mobile" units, which boasted 435 helicopters. For three days, the two NVA Regiments attacked the Air Cavalry's perimeter repeatedly, while helicopters brought in supplies and behemoth B-52 bombers, flying from the Pacific island of Guam, carpet-bombed the NVA positions. The battle ended when the North's troops pulled back into Cambodia, leaving three hundred Americans dead and three thousand of the six thousand NVA troops killed.¹⁷ Although MACV hailed the battle as a victory, locking the army into Westmoreland's attrition strategy, Ia Drang actually meant trouble: learning the lesson of that battle, the NVA from then on avoided any similar set-piece engagements where it could be bloodied by superior US firepower.

Indeed, in the second year of the war, Hanoi changed to elusive hit-and-run tactics. Instead of engaging American forces in frontal assaults, it began fighting a war of pinprick engagements with thousands of small ambushes, each leaving a few American dead or wounded, which in the end added up to heavy casualties. To score the high enemy "body count" required by Westmoreland's attrition strategy, American infantry units became, in the words of a prominent brigade commander, "the principal combat reconnaissance force," or to put it more bluntly, the bait to flush out the enemy for decimation by air and artillery strikes ("the principal destructive force")—a strategy that led to an extraordinary forty-seven thousand US combat deaths, sparking sustained anti-war protests in campuses and cities across America.¹⁸

By early 1967, Westmoreland had resolved all the logistic problems, allowing him to create an army of five hundred thousand well-supplied troops that now seemed ready to execute the final stage of his strategic plan. To break the enemy, he launched massive search-and-destroy operations against communist-controlled enclaves surrounding Saigon. Fighting from

hilltop bastions such as Khe Sanh in the north, US forces also repulsed North Vietnamese attempts to breach the South's border defenses, and came to believe that they had checked the enemy's main offensive. By the end of 1967, Westmoreland was confident that he had achieved "crossover"—the point at which Hanoi would no longer be able to resupply men and material lost on the battlefield—leaving, MACV estimated, only 299,000 Viet Cong guerrillas. In a visit home that November, Westmoreland told the National Press Club: "We have reached an important point when the end comes into view." To explain his optimism, the general insisted that "the enemy is running out of men."¹⁹

The general's optimism soon died in the 1968 Tet Offensive. To comply with MACV's tacit directive to keep any estimate of the Viet Cong forces below 300,000, the military manipulated the data to produce that estimate of 299,000 guerrillas. Indeed, a full year before Tet the chief of its order-of-battle intelligence section, Colonel Gains B. Hawkins, admitted, "You know, there's a lot more of those little bastards out there than we thought there were." Although CIA analysts found that the real figure was 600,000 and felt "the military's numbers were faked," Agency director Richard Helms capitulated and authorized, just four months before the famed Tet Offensive, an even lower estimate of 240,000 Viet Cong—contributing to the US command's fatal overconfidence.²⁰ Moreover, the enemy attacks in the northern part of South Vietnam would prove a mere diversion, not the main threat as Westmoreland assumed. Reprising his strategy of feint and thrust that had defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the North Vietnamese commander General Vo Nguyen Giap was feinting in the north at Khe Sanh to distract Westmoreland while preparing to unleash his main attack on the southern capital at Saigon.

THE TET OFFENSIVE

On January 31, 1968, as the battle at Khe Sanh in the north was in its eleventh day, some eighty-four thousand North Vietnamese regular troops and Viet Cong guerrillas launched simultaneous attacks on Saigon, 36 of South Vietnam's 44 provincial capitals, and 64 of its 242 district capitals. After quietly infiltrating Saigon for days before the attack, five thousand VC troops emerged from hiding to strike key installations, including ARVN

headquarters, the government radio station, and the grounds of the US embassy.²¹ The fighting soon became so intense and consequential that the Tet Offensive would mark the end of any US chance for victory in Vietnam.

The planning for the attack had been supervised by that remarkable spy Pham Xuan An, Hanoi's man on the spot in Saigon. After joining the Viet Minh in 1944, fighting against the French as a platoon leader, and becoming a member of the Communist Party, An first infiltrated the Vietnam National Army's psywar unit and then transferred in 1955 to the French-US TRIM training office, where he met rising young officers like Nguyen Van Thieu and Cao Van Vien.²² When the CIA's Edward Lansdale arrived in Saigon in 1954, he met An while advising that psywar unit and, with his usual overconfidence when recruiting local assets, taught him intelligence tradecraft and introduced him to key members of his CIA team—notably, his deputy Lucien Conein and the later head of the Strategic Hamlets Program, Rufus Phillips. With a scholarship from the CIA's Asia Foundation, courtesy of Lansdale, as well as secret travel funds from the Communist Party, An studied journalism at Orange Coast Community College near Los Angeles in 1957 and 1958, gaining insights into the American mindset that would later allow him to analyze the strategic significance of stolen US documents for his superiors in Hanoi.²³

Upon returning to Saigon, An found his Communist Party contact had been arrested amid Diem's relentless repression. He adjusted to the setback by spending three years on his own in a Saigon intelligence unit headed by Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen before resuming party contact and becoming a journalist—first for the official Viet News Agency, then for Reuters, and later for *Time* magazine.²⁴ On any given day, An could be found at Givral's café in downtown Saigon, holding court as the informal “dean of the Vietnamese press corps,” chain-smoking and chatting about the war with all comers. An American reporter described An as “intelligent, cordial, and analytical,” and someone who “seemed super dispassionate” about the war. Given his contacts with key Saigon officials and American journalists like *New Yorker* reporter Robert Shaplen, who had close ties to the CIA station in Saigon, An was able to deliver strategic intelligence to communist couriers, many of whom would be captured and killed in this dangerous game.²⁵

During his fifteen years as a spy, An refused to keep official documents that might prove incriminating. Instead, he summarized the contents of

those documents, typing up a total of 498 detailed reports containing intelligence critical for most of Hanoi's major victories. Hand-carried to Cambodia and flown to North Vietnam, his reports were eagerly awaited in Hanoi where his vivid prose and acute analysis once prompted General Giap to exclaim: "We are now in the United States' war room!"²⁶

Before the 1968 Tet Offensive, An escorted the head of communist intelligence, a pistol-packing major named Tu Cang, around Saigon in an old Renault sedan while they selected some twenty targets for the attack. Although he risked his cover by warning American colleagues of the impending Tet Offensive and later enemy attacks, An managed to maintain his difficult double life until April 1976 when he retired from *Time*. Honoring him as a "hero" of the revolution, Hanoi awarded An the rank of general along with sixteen medals, one for each of his contributions to key military operations.²⁷

During the two weeks of fighting in Saigon during the 1968 Tet Offensive, American TV networks broadcast images of the city's devastation, particularly the Viet Cong attack on the American embassy, raising major questions about the credibility of Westmoreland's previous claims of victory. Indeed, the impact of the Tet Offensive was paradoxical and profound—a US military victory that became a public relations debacle. Despite the initial success of the enemy's surprise attack, MACV concluded, quite correctly, that by the end of that protracted battle US forces had won a major victory by killing fifty-eight thousand enemy fighters, almost 70 percent of their troops. Those casualties effectively eliminated the Viet Cong as a significant military force for the rest of the war. Despite such objective metrics of triumph, the massive Saigon press corps sent home a torrent of images that—cascading one over the other—showed the American people the face of a war they didn't like.²⁸

Of equal import, the Tet Offensive was clearly an American intelligence failure. More than any other battle, it highlighted the paramount importance of the clandestine domain in determining the outcome of the war, exposing multiple limitations of the US intelligence effort. Basic order-of-battle information on the number of Viet Cong had been hampered by politicized analysis. At a tactical level, the enemy had maneuvered eighty-four thousand troops near dozens of cities almost without detection. Strategically, Westmoreland's headquarters had misread General Giap's feint at Khe Sanh. Perhaps most importantly, the CIA's Phoenix Program

had spent years attacking the VC underground with torture and assassination, but somehow still left thousands of guerrillas with ample capacity for major military operations.

THE PHOENIX PROGRAM

Paralleling the military's conventional combat was the CIA's launch of the Phoenix Program. Arriving in Saigon in late 1963, CIA station chief Peer de Silva, as he recalled in his memoirs, found that "the Viet Cong were monstrous in their application of torture and murder to achieve the political and psychological impact they wanted." Inspired by the concept of counterterror derived from the writings of French strategist Roger Trinquier, de Silva and others coordinated scattered pacification programs into a campaign "to bring danger and death to the Vietcong functionaries themselves, especially in the areas where they felt secure."²⁹

By 1967, the CIA had developed a nationwide intelligence collection system that reached from the National Interrogation Center in Saigon, through regional centers, down to Provincial Interrogation Centers, whose identical concrete compounds were found in most of the country's forty-four provinces. After computer data banks in Saigon identified suspected communist cadre, this intelligence was operationalized at the provincial level where CIA-funded Provincial Reconnaissance Units, composed largely of branded criminals, were dispatched to arrest or execute those "targets." Without any internal check on accuracy, this self-contained data loop proved all too susceptible to the input of false information from enemy counter-intelligence.³⁰

After nearly four years of secret operations, Congress and the press exposed the Phoenix Program to full public scrutiny in the US in 1970–71, producing a short, intense debate over the morality of the CIA's methods. In testimony before a House subcommittee, career CIA officer William Colby, then serving as chief of pacification in Vietnam, stated that Phoenix had killed 20,587 people since its inception in 1968. When Representative Ogden Reid charged that Phoenix was responsible for "indiscriminate killings," Colby, who would later become the CIA director, defended the program as "an essential part of the war effort" that was "designed to protect the Vietnamese people from terrorism."³¹

However, a senior agency official who supervised Phoenix, Orrin DeForest, found that the six hundred CIA officers in South Vietnam “had never even learned the basics of intelligence” and the program produced “no intelligence to speak of,” even though there was “all this hostile activity . . . carried out by a massive Vietcong infrastructure and all we could get were these tiny little pecks and nibbles.” Another career CIA officer who was involved in the Phoenix operation, Ralph McGehee, reported that “never in the history of our work in Vietnam did we get one clear-cut, high-ranking Vietcong agent.”³² If one were to add the 20,587 people reportedly killed under the CIA to the number of similar fatalities after the South Vietnamese began administering the Phoenix Program, it would yield a total of 40,994 extrajudicial killings. That tally raises a key question: How could such a lethal CIA program torture countless thousands and execute 41,000 more but fail to eliminate its communist targets?³³

In that vast military apparatus, one Navy SEAL assigned to Phoenix, Mike Beamon, recognized how Viet Cong counter-intelligence would “feed information through us and other intelligence sources to the CIA and set up a target that maybe wasn’t a VC, but some person they wanted wiped out. It might even have been a South Vietnamese leader.”³⁴ The implications of that statement are profound: for nearly fifty years, historians of the Vietnam War have failed to appreciate the sophistication of communist counter-intelligence and its potential role in subverting the larger US war effort.

My own realization that such a thing might be possible was accidental. As a sophomore at a small New England boarding school in the early 1960s, I was on the wrestling team with a senior named John Merson, who later dropped out of college and wound up in Vietnam as a Marine Corps lance corporal leading a squad in village pacification efforts. In his memoir titled *War Lessons*, Merson would recall that his unit “received a report of Viet Cong travelling down river in our direction.” So, shortly after midnight, as the boats came down the river, Merson’s Marines “fired automatic rifles, machine guns, and grenade launchers,” slaughtering all twenty people in the boats. Although the intelligence had proven accurate when it came to time and place, it was off on just one small detail—the people in the boats were not Viet Cong soldiers but, as Merson wrote, “unarmed women, children, and old men.” In shock and revulsion at what they had done, Merson and his squad waited out the rest of their tour of

duty, hiding in villages at night instead of conducting more combat operations.³⁵

Before he published that book in 2008, Merson sent me the manuscript and I shared that story at Christmas with my stepfather, Cruger L. Bright, a retired Marine colonel who had served as deputy chief of intelligence in General Westmoreland's Saigon headquarters. As soon as I finished telling him about that horrific massacre, my stepfather shot right back with absolute assurance: "Good counter-intelligence by the enemy!" When I asked what he meant, he answered curtly: "Marines demoralized. Villagers hate Americans. Hate our Saigon allies. Effective."³⁶ That started me thinking: If a local Viet Cong militia could defeat a skilled Marine squad with a smart leader—and Merson was very smart, later earning an MBA from Harvard and becoming an innovator at IBM—with such sophisticated counter-intelligence, what could the real communist intelligence professionals accomplish?

In a major study of enemy intelligence in late 1969, the lead CIA analyst, Samuel A. Adams, found that the Viet Cong had thirty thousand spies inside the Saigon government who were "running" parts of the National Police. The enemy also "controlled the counter-intelligence branch of the South Vietnamese Military Security Service . . . , and . . . in several areas of Vietnam, the VC were in charge of our own Phoenix Program."³⁷ In retrospect, it seems likely that communist counter-intelligence had flipped Phoenix to make it a killing machine that simultaneously slaughtered the Viet Cong's enemies and turned the South Vietnamese peasantry against the Saigon government, much as the VC had done with the Strategic Hamlet Program.

WITHDRAWAL AND DEFEAT

As millions of anti-war protesters filled American streets in the fall of 1969, President Richard Nixon launched a "Vietnamization" strategy that would replace US combat forces with South Vietnamese soldiers, thereby reducing the high American casualties that were helping fuel those anti-war protests. While US troops were drawing down toward a complete exit by August 1972, Nixon tried to buy Saigon some time by disrupting the Ho Chi Minh

Trail supply route—first by attacking communist sanctuaries in Cambodia in 1970 and, then, by sending the ARVN into southern Laos in 1971.

But the surprise critical to both operations was compromised by communist spy Pham Xuan An, whose timely intelligence allowed the North Vietnamese military to evacuate the Cambodian sanctuaries safely and turn the Laos invasion into a death trap for South Vietnamese troops.³⁸ By the time American soldiers started leaving Vietnam in September 1971, their discipline had collapsed. A full third (34 percent of them) were by then habitual heroin users, and most units were no longer capable of effective combat.³⁹ Flailing about for a solution, Nixon ordered the massive bombardment of Hanoi by B-52 bombers during the Christmas season in 1972, forcing North Vietnam to negotiate a peace accord at Paris just a month later. In a casual but prescient remark, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger said of the South Vietnamese, “If they are lucky, they can hold out for a year and a half.”⁴⁰

Ignoring the Paris peace agreement, in late 1974 Hanoi launched a small, tentative attack that captured a South Vietnamese provincial capital with surprising ease. Realizing it could defeat its South Vietnamese enemy in a matter of months and assured by An’s espionage that the US would not again intervene, Hanoi launched a massive attack in March 1975 on the city of Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands, which An’s intelligence had identified as particularly vulnerable. Panicking, President Thieu ordered his troops to withdraw from the northern half of the country, precipitating a sudden collapse of Saigon’s army.⁴¹ With the North Vietnamese now surrounding the city, Saigon descended into an orgy of corruption and President Thieu headed for the airport, his breath smelling of alcohol and his luggage heavy with gold bars.⁴² As South Vietnam’s million-strong army imploded, North Vietnamese tanks simply drove into Saigon and right up to the presidential palace, where the interim government surrendered.

By the time it was over, the Vietnam War had produced an extraordinary death toll—58,000 American soldiers, 254,000 South Vietnamese troops, 587,000 Vietnamese civilians, and over a million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.⁴³ Such carnage had so broken the morale of the US Army and so divided the American public that Washington would not be able to deploy conventional combat forces overseas for the remainder of the Cold War, forcing the White House to rely on CIA covert tactics developed, significantly, in neighboring Laos.

THE SECRET WAR IN LAOS

As the war in South Vietnam went on (and on), the US was also fighting a secret, surrogate war in Laos. During the early 1960s, mountainous landlocked Laos, despite its impoverished population of only two million, became a major flash point of Cold War confrontation. After approaching the brink of nuclear warfare over that small country, in July 1962 the superpowers pulled back by agreeing at Geneva to neutralize Laos—with US advisers leaving that October and Soviet arms airlifts ending a month later.⁴⁴

When the Vietnam War escalated in 1964, however, North Vietnamese troops started transiting through Laos en route to South Vietnam. Wanting to intervene in Laos, but barred from doing so by that neutrality agreement, Washington launched two types of secret warfare there.

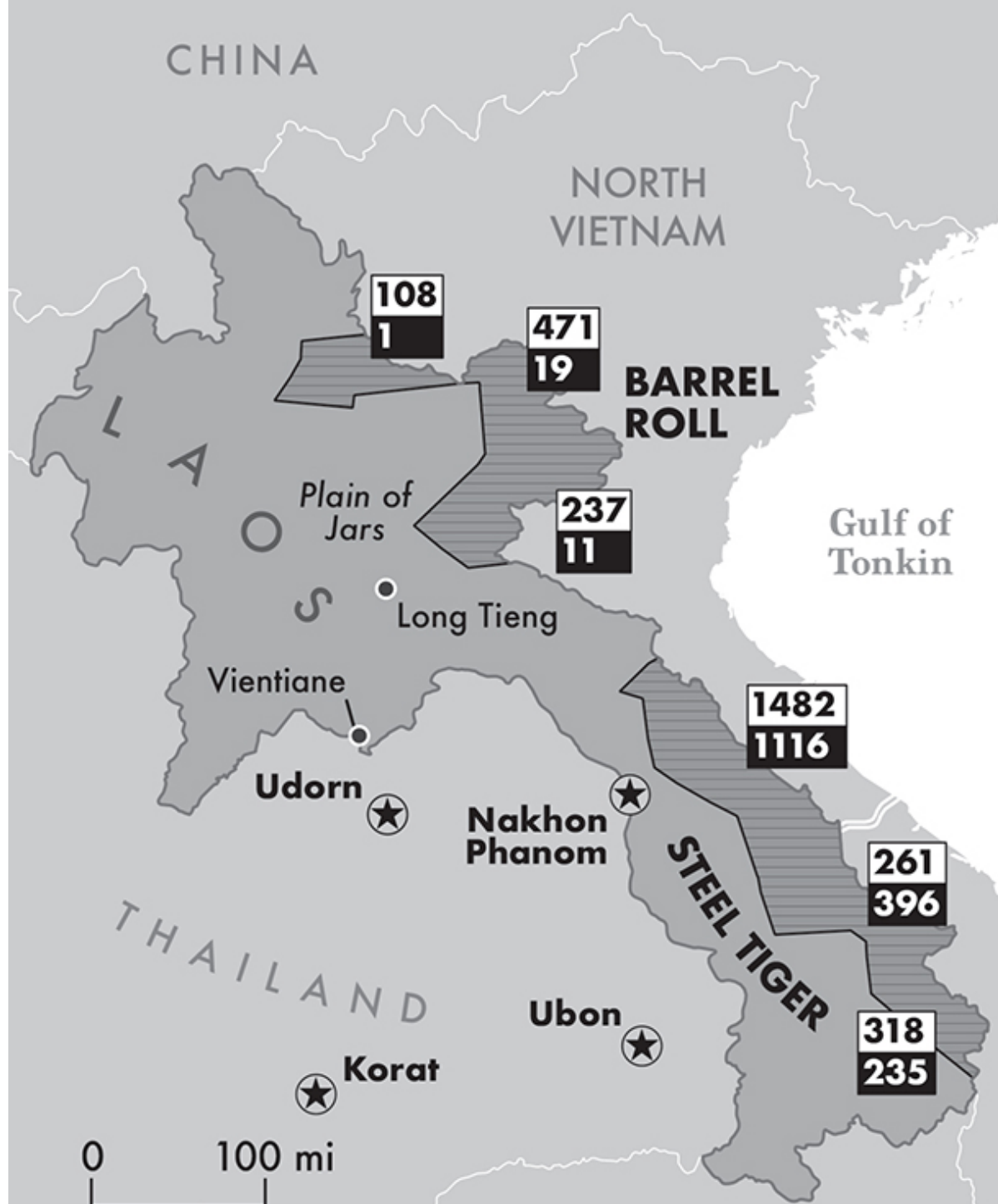
In the southern panhandle of Laos, the Air Force created an electronic battlefield under “Operation Steel Tiger” for sustained bombing to destroy North Vietnamese trucks heading down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to South Vietnam. From 1968 to 1973, fifty thousand US airmen at bases in neighboring Thailand launched 456,000 sensor-guided bombing sorties over southern Laos aimed at destroying the thousand-plus North Vietnamese trucks driving down the trail.⁴⁵ Although the Air Force would later claim that 80 percent of those enemy trucks were destroyed, the CIA estimated only 20 percent were eliminated. In northern Laos, a parallel bombing campaign tried to check the relentless communist attempts to advance on the country’s capital at Vientiane. All told, between 1964 and 1973, the Air Force and Navy flew 580,000 sorties that dropped nearly 2.5 million tons of bombs on Laos, which was significantly more than the 2.1 million tons the US dropped on both Germany and Japan during World War II.⁴⁶

In a very different kind of war waged in the rugged mountains of northeastern Laos, CIA paramilitary officers had trained a secret army of thirty thousand Hmong tribal militia to fight the local communist guerrillas, the Pathet Lao. But in 1967, as the fighting in northern Laos intensified, the Air Force launched a massive bombing campaign called “Operation Barrel Roll” that reduced CIA officers and Hmong fighters alike to cogs in a massive, mechanized killing machine. Why such sustained combat in such an obscure corner of the globe? Simply put, if the Pathet Lao had fought their way across two hundred miles of these northern mountains to capture the capital city of Vientiane, then a new government could have invoked the

1962 Geneva neutrality accord to stop all US bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, thereby ending any chance of achieving what was termed “crossover” in General Westmoreland’s war of attrition in South Vietnam. In the end, though, the battles in northern Laos became a maelstrom consuming everything in its path—the Hmong militia, the Pathet Lao guerrillas, and the hapless civilians of the Plain of Jars.

In marked contrast to the half-million Americans fighting in South Vietnam, this secret war, in its early phase from 1961 to 1966, was run by just a handful of CIA officers deeply embedded in those rugged highlands. To check the advance of local communist guerrillas in the north, in April 1963 President Kennedy authorized the CIA to form a secret army of ten thousand Hmong militia. A year later, President Johnson ordered the first bombing operations in the country’s northeast to support the CIA’s guerrillas. In effect, those directives created the three main components for what later became a massive covert war in northern Laos—conventional combat operations by the Royal Laotian Army, the CIA’s “Secret Army” of thirty thousand Hmong guerrillas, and tactical support by the US Air Force.^{[47](#)}

US BOMBING SORTIES LAOS, DECEMBER 1967





By the time the US finally stopped its operations in Laos in 1973, the Air Force had completed the biggest bombing campaign in military history, while the Agency called its secret war there “the largest paramilitary operations ever undertaken by the CIA.”⁴⁸

As the fighting heated up after 1960, the CIA turned to an aggressive Hmong officer, Major Vang Pao, and began transforming his tribal militia into a more agile guerrilla force because, as the Agency put it, the Lao Army’s “military prowess rating hovered close to zero.”⁴⁹ Those Hmong guerrillas were led by just four CIA operatives, who fought so independently on that remote Cold War frontier that they became Washington’s men on the spot in Laos. The most influential was James W. “Bill” Lair, a CIA paramilitary officer who in 1951 had been posted to Bangkok and there formed a Thai commando squad called PARU, which he deployed to nearby Laos during the Cold War crisis of the early 1960s. Realizing that the “CIA had not considered creating a guerrilla force” using the Hmong even though they “had a reputation for combativeness,” he later flew deep into the Laotian mountains to meet Vang Pao. Impressed with his charisma, Lair decided “to bypass the bureaucratic process” by taking the project directly to his CIA boss Desmond Fitzgerald for immediate approval.⁵⁰

Within two years, Lair had ensured that all the basics for a CIA secret army in Laos were in place, including training for some twelve thousand Hmong guerrillas, opening a secure upland air base at Long Tieng, and delegating field command to two CIA subordinates. The most famous of these, Anthony Poshepny (a.k.a. “Tony Poe”), was a hard-drinking ex-Marine who came to Laos in 1961 as an Agency paramilitary officer. He would soon become controversial for his disdain for the Hmong guerrillas, manifest in his frequent arguments with their commander, General Vang Pao.⁵¹

Much of the operational work was done by J. Vinton Lawrence, an idealistic Princeton graduate who joined the CIA after college and found himself, at age twenty-two, living in a “pristine and absolutely beautiful” highland valley at Long Tieng inhabited by “twenty people . . . and about twenty-five water buffalo.” As CIA liaison to the Hmong, he also “lived and ate and slept with Vang Pao and was his constant companion.”⁵² In these early years, Lawrence made sure Hmong militia operations remained very “low key,” with thirty road-watch teams scattered across northern Laos and small Special Guerrilla Units “trained in hit-and-run harassment tactics”—a striking contrast with the conventional war to come.⁵³

But the archetypal man on the spot was William “Bill” Young, who had been raised in these mountains. His grandfather was a Baptist missionary who had arrived around 1900, proselytizing among the hill tribes in Burma and southern China. His father grew up in those highlands, becoming a valuable asset for the precursor of the CIA, the Office of Strategic Services, in Burma during World War II. Joining the CIA in 1958 at the age of twenty-five, Bill Young used his fluency in four local languages to build a “secret army” for the Agency. But Lair soon found that although Bill Young “looked like 100% American,” he was “basically a Lao hill tribesman” who “was just a strange guy with Americans,” so in 1962, Lair sent him to a remote corner of northern Laos near the Burma-China border. There, Young would come to command his own covert kingdom—fighting local Pathet Lao guerrillas in northwest Laos, operating secret radio posts inside Burma’s Shan States, and sending tribal spy teams deep inside southern China to tap telephones and monitor troop movements. After Tony Poe became an alcoholic and did what Bill Lair called “all these damn bizarre things,” such as dropping severed heads from planes on North Vietnamese troops, Lair sent him to join Bill Young in northwest Laos. When the tension between the two erupted into violent arguments, the Agency fired Young since his ultimate loyalties seemed to lie with the hill tribes, not the secret mission.⁵⁴

In late 1963, those CIA operatives began launching the Hmong militia on agile guerrilla operations—first blowing up bridges in communist areas, then shelling enemy positions on the Plain of Jars, and finally occupying mountaintops from the Plain of Jars all the way to the border of North Vietnam. Supplied by Air America, the Agency’s airline flying out of a

secret air base at Long Tieng, the CIA's clandestine army clung to those hilltops deep inside communist territory.⁵⁵

As the Vietnam conflict intensified after 1967, however, the character of combat in northern Laos shifted from guerrilla operations, led by those daring men on the spot, to conventional warfare backed by massive aerial bombardment. During the Tet Offensive that swept South Vietnam in 1968, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops launched a major attack on the CIA's Laotian bases near North Vietnam, destroying a US Air Force TACAN radar installation atop Phou Pha Thi, a six-thousand-foot eagle's-nest mountain only seventeen miles from the border; that base had guided over half the bombing missions on North Vietnam. In the darkness before midnight on March 10, 1968, a squad of thirty-three North Vietnamese commandos silently scaled the sheer 650-foot cliff, armed with rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and two hundred rounds of ammo. In the darkness before dawn, that NVA squad surprised the defenders, knocking out the radar with their RPGs and killing eleven of the sixteen US Air Force technicians at the site.⁵⁶

For Vint Lawrence, such battles exemplified the CIA's error in using the Hmong guerrillas for conventional combat, a disastrous decision that, he said, "was bordering on the criminal." When he first arrived in Laos, the war was an "adventure that you couldn't duplicate for the rest of your life." Later, however, it became a "tragedy" for the Hmong that left him with "sorrow and regret to see what happened to them." By deploying the Hmong as infantry at places like Phou Pha Thi, he added, "we made them sitting ducks and invited a very strong retaliation from the North Vietnamese—which eventually came."⁵⁷

Desperate to "relieve the pressure on Vietnam," the CIA station in Vientiane, according to Bill Lair, "pushed Vang Pao more and more into regular operations," with high casualties that forced him "to get younger and younger kids in the units." By then, the once pristine Long Tieng valley had become a sordid shantytown housing forty-five thousand Hmong refugees. Not wanting to be "present at the funeral," the men on the spot quit the operation in quick succession—first, Vint Lawrence (1966), then Bill Young (1967), and finally Bill Lair (1968). That left the Hmong militia under the control of the CIA's chief of station, Theodore Shackley, whom Lawrence called "a dishonorable and venal human being." No longer the "truly charismatic" leader he had once been, Vang Pao had, Lawrence said,

become “enamored of the toys of war”—airplanes, artillery, and mortars—and embraced “the militarization and the conventionalization of the Hmong,” putting them “on a road to disaster.”⁵⁸

A bloody battle for control of the Plain of Jars raged throughout 1969 and 1970. North Vietnam’s regulars would advance with light tanks, threatening the CIA base at Long Tieng despite “a considerable increase in tactical air strikes” to three hundred daily, including B-52 saturation bombing of parts of northern Laos. In the many months of struggle over that strategic terrain, Vang Pao’s forces suffered heavy losses, and the CIA was pressed to conduct a mass evacuation of Hmong villages to camps farther south already filled with 150,000 refugees. When the Pathet Lao finally advanced across the Plain of Jars to attack the main CIA base at Long Tieng in 1971, Vang Pao’s secret army fought desperately and successfully for four months to hold Skyline Ridge above the main CIA airstrip, simultaneously protecting the 50,000 Hmong refugees in the valley below. By late 1971, however, all that combat had decimated Vang Pao’s army of 30,000, with 3,300 of them killed and another 5,400 wounded. The CIA reported that “12- and 13-year-olds were shouldering the weapons wielded a few years before by their fathers.” In the view of an official US Air Force history, in early 1972 the Hmong “had ceased to exist as an effective fighting force.” By the time the fighting ended a year later, the Hmong, according to the CIA, had “suffered casualties estimated at 10–20 percent of their entire numbers.”⁵⁹

During those last four years of combat, 1969 to 1973, the US Air Force, flying from four nearby Thai bases, increased its bombing sorties in northern Laos from fifteen thousand in 1969 to forty-two thousand a year later. Instead of F-4 fighters with limited payloads, behemoth B-52s now carpet-bombed the Plain of Jars and adjacent areas occupied by Pathet Lao communist guerrillas. After 1970, each F-4 fighter could drop some six hundred fist-sized, antipersonnel bomblets in two seconds of a bombing run. By the end of that aerial campaign in 1973, there would be eighty million unexploded bomblets left on the ground in Laos, some of which still kill and maim to this day.⁶⁰

When the US ceased its air operations in Laos after the 1973 Paris Peace Accord, the war turned definitively against the CIA’s secret army, which had become dependent on massive air support. As Pathet Lao forces closed in on Long Tieng after Saigon’s fall in April 1975, the CIA evacuated Vang

Pao and his family—abandoning thousands of Hmong fighters and their families, most of whom would eventually cross the Mekong River to refugee camps in Thailand and resettlement in America.⁶¹ In December 1975, the Lao communists abolished the 600-year-old monarchy and established a Marxist regime there closely aligned with Moscow.

Although that outcome might have seemed like defeat for the West, the CIA's secret war in Laos was, on balance, a strategic success. For nearly a decade, from 1960 to 1967, Hmong tribal militia, trained by a handful of CIA officers, used agile guerrilla tactics to block communist gains in the strategic terrain of northern Laos. From 1968 to 1973, the Hmong militia, fighting as conventional infantry, suffered calamitous casualties. But they held back communist advances long enough to keep a pro-American Lao regime in power while the US bombed the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos. Although it failed in the end, the CIA's secret war in Laos gave General Westmoreland's attrition strategy a fighting chance of success in South Vietnam, and did so without any of the American casualties that made conventional combat there so controversial domestically.

THE LEGACY OF WAR

For the men on the spot in Indochina, defeat was a bitter pill to swallow—with Tony Poe drinking himself to death in California in 2003; Bill Young working as a security consultant in Thailand until he died by suicide in 2011; Bill Lair retiring from the CIA at fifty-three to become a truck driver; and Vint Lawrence quitting the Agency early to shed the trauma of combat for a successful career as a caricaturist. Victory was equally acrid for Pham Xuan An, who would live under virtual house arrest in Saigon until his death in 2006.

More broadly, the wars in Laos and Vietnam would have a profound impact on Washington's strategy during the Cold War's final phase from 1975 to 1990. The army's heavy combat losses made the American people quietly but resolutely casualty-averse. Public opposition to the war's controversial tactics—which produced fifty-eight thousand American deaths compared to the thirty-six thousand killed in the Korean War—barred any major overseas deployment of US combat troops for the rest of the Cold War. Moreover, the heavy Air Force bombing of the Vietnam era

led to both a congressionally mandated cessation of air operations in Indochina in 1973 and two international treaties in 1977—the Environmental Modification Convention and Protocol I of the Geneva Convention—written to bar another air war like that one. For the cold warriors, however, there was a silver lining in these setbacks. Vietnam’s bloody infantry combat had created a problem by forcing the shift to an all-volunteer army that would be deployed sparingly for the rest of the Cold War. But the secret war in Laos offered a solution by testing new tactics for CIA covert intervention that the White House would later use against Soviet surrogates in Central America, Central Asia, and southern Africa.

Even more important, the Vietnam War also sparked a global eruption of youth protests that shook the world order. While communist repression aroused youthful unrest in Eastern Europe, it was the Vietnam War, more than anything else, that catalyzed sustained student protests in what Washington called the Free World—in France, Japan, the Philippines, West Germany, and, above all, the United States.

To grasp the sheer scale of this generational clash and its implications for the Cold War, let’s begin with demographic fundamentals. There were seventy-six million births in the United States from 1946 to 1964, compared with only forty-seven million births from 1928 to 1945. In Japan, births surged from 1.9 million in 1939 to 2.7 million in 1947. Similarly, in France, they rose from fourteen per thousand people in 1940 to twenty-two per thousand in 1950, producing a large postwar generation.⁶²

By the mid-1960s, the leading edge of the baby boom, those born between 1946 and 1950, started entering universities worldwide. Instead of sending their youth to war, work brigades, or assembly lines, postwar societies expanded universities to train knowledge workers. Crowded into classrooms, dormitories, and boarding houses, these floating youth communities shared what radical philosopher Herbert Marcuse called “the Great Refusal” as they aspired to “new relationships . . . expressive of a true harmony between the social and individual needs and goals.”⁶³ CIA director Richard Helms agreed, noting that the “children of a generally affluent generation—West or East—[are] deeply engrossed in the search for some newer means of arriving at moral values.”⁶⁴

For five years, 1967 to 1972, the cities of the West were roiled by massive youth demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Inspired by the civil rights marches that brought 250,000 African Americans to Washington

in 1963, the small anti-war protests in Boston, New York, and San Francisco in 1965–66 soon swelled into the largest demonstrations that the United States had ever experienced, with 400,000 people marching in New York City (April 1967), 500,000 in Washington, DC (November 1969), and 150,000 in San Francisco (April 1971). Throughout 1968, such mass mobilizations became a global phenomenon as, in the words of historian Jeremi Suri, “the entire world shook” from urban protests that “threatened to undermine the international balance of power.” In February, ten thousand European activists met at Berlin’s Freie University to launch continent-wide protests against the Vietnam War. In March, the streets of London saw a violent protest with three hundred arrests. In May, students in Paris built cobblestone barricades to fight police in riots that shook the foundations of the French state. In August, Czech students armed with tree branches and firebombs fought the Soviet tanks that were suppressing their “Prague Spring.” That same month, youth riots disrupted the Democratic Party convention in Chicago. In October, twenty thousand activists battled riot police during an anti-Vietnam protest at Tokyo’s Shinjuku Station.⁶⁵

Such a sustained “global disruption” forced governments worldwide to placate the protesters with significant policy changes, including US troop withdrawals from Vietnam and negotiations over nuclear détente in Europe. With domestic support for Washington’s aggressive anti-communism weakened by anti-Vietnam protests, the Nixon administration would engage in a diplomatic détente in 1972 that slowed the nuclear arms race with Moscow and, through the president’s historic visit to Beijing, curtailed China’s diplomatic isolation. Not only did that visit put pressure on Hanoi to sign the 1973 peace accords, but it also launched a long-term trade relationship between the US and China.⁶⁶

Most of the protesters graduated and got jobs, but there were a few who gave their lives over to leading these social movements that disrupted and even redirected their societies in ways that shaped the trajectory of the Cold War. Most fundamentally, these dissidents provided a striking contrast to the clandestine men on the spot. Those covert operatives covered in this account, mostly born between 1908 and 1927, were part of a distinctive generation that came of age during the Depression decade of the 1930s and the world war that followed, hardening them to serve the state as military commanders and clandestine operatives in the crises that marked the Cold War.

By contrast, the Vietnam-era demonstrators were part of a “baby boom” generation born between 1946 and 1964 that grew up amid postwar peace and prosperity, opening them to the possibilities of a better future. Leading a generational transition, the organizers of those youthful protests would become charismatic advocates for societal change—figures such as the revolutionary Jose Maria Sison (the Philippines), the eloquent rabble-rouser Rudi Dutschke (Germany), the playful dissident Daniel Cohn-Bendit (France), the charismatic peace advocate Oda Makoto (Japan), the human rights crusader Václav Havel (Czechoslovakia), and the radical activists Bernardine Dohrn and Fred Branfman (United States).

To probe for the deeper implications of those seven individual lives, we can merge biographical details into a collective biography, or prosopography, starting with the key factor that unites them all: their dates of birth. Those seven activists were born between 1932 and 1945, making them somewhat older leaders with the refined organizational skills to mobilize the younger baby boom generation during the 1960s.

By turning the otherwise inchoate demographic mass of the baby boomers into a coherent movement, those activists shattered the consensus sustaining the Cold War conflict on both sides of the Iron Curtain and pressured leaders of East and West toward a *détente* that would move the Cold War in less dangerous directions. In their struggle for social reform, those youth leaders faced a constant choice between peaceful protests, whose impact could be frustratingly slow, and violence that might somehow accelerate the pace of change.

DAYS OF RAGE IN AMERICA

During the 1960s, the Vietnam War brought the draft and foreign policy to US college campuses in ways that sparked protests by the country’s large baby boom generation. Since students initially had draft deferments for both undergraduate and graduate study, President Lyndon Johnson’s decision to send American troops to Vietnam in March 1965 aroused only a sprinkling of campus protests. But in July 1967, the president limited draft deferments for graduate school and in February 1968 he abolished almost all of them, suddenly transforming the Vietnam War into an inescapable reality for college-age males. Once-small anti-war protests soon swelled into mass

mobilizations—starting with the October 1967 March on the Pentagon and culminating in the nationwide protests over the invasion of Cambodia in 1970. Between 1964 and 1974, there were 880 major protests involving tens of millions of Americans, peaking at two hundred demonstrations a year in 1970 and 1972.⁶⁷

In the earliest anti-war mobilizations, a radical campus group called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) played a seminal role. Founded at the University of Michigan in 1960, SDS issued a 25,000-word appeal to baby boomers as “people of this generation” influenced by “the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, [that] brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, . . . might die at any time.”⁶⁸ In his speech at the first national anti-war protest in April 1965, SDS president Paul Potter captured the crisis pushing this generation to revolt. “The incredible war in Vietnam,” he said, “has provided the razor, the terrifying sharp cutting edge that has finally severed . . . the illusion that morality and democracy are the guiding principles of American foreign policy.” By 1969, a growing sense of anger over the Vietnam War had inspired thirty thousand students to form three hundred SDS chapters nationwide, including one at Columbia University in New York led by Mark Rudd, who said simply: “Vietnam touched a wound inside me.”⁶⁹

Within weeks of President Johnson’s cancelation of graduate school deferments, campuses nationwide announced plans for a “Moratorium” teach-in about the draft. As a graduating senior at Columbia University, I was on the campus committee, along with local SDS leader Ted Gold, planning the daylong event that aimed to “provide each individual with enough strength to follow the dictates of his conscience.”⁷⁰ With his amiable manner, Gold persuaded us that the program should include a lawyer who could advise students about their rights under the draft law, presumably so we could follow our conscience without getting into trouble.

When Moratorium Day came on March 13, 1968, our convocation was packed with hundreds of male undergraduates when out walked Ted Gold’s lawyer wearing a strikingly short mini-skirt. For the next thirty minutes, Bernardine Dohrn from the leftist National Lawyers Guild gave us a crash course not in draft law but in sexual politics, as she held the attention of her all-male audience with hair flicks, bared legs, and a long tassel scarf dangling to the thigh. Not only did that performance reveal her as

persuasive speaker, but it also showed a capacity for manipulation that would not serve the anti-war movement well.⁷¹

That day with Ted Gold and Bernardine Dohrn foreshadowed the consequences of choices about violence that activists would make during the tempestuous years that followed. Born in New York City in 1947 and raised on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Ted Gold rejected his parents' Old Left dogma for a more "decentralized socialism" that led him to organize the campus chapter of SDS.⁷² In the weeks following that Moratorium meeting, Ted and his SDS members led the occupation of several Columbia University buildings by some seven hundred students, sparking two months of protests and rioting. After his suspension by Columbia, Ted joined the radical SDS Weathermen faction and made a trip to Castro's Cuba with Bernardine Dohrn, where they met Vietnamese communists who had lived under the intense US bombing—a "charged experience," in the words of an SDS leader, that inspired their decision to launch a violent "clandestine operation."⁷³

When SDS went underground for "armed struggle" in December 1969, Ted Gold would become part of a secret cell in New York City that made several dynamite bombs they planned to detonate during a dance at Fort Dix in nearby New Jersey where draftees were training for the Vietnam War. But a bomb detonated accidentally, demolishing the Greenwich Village town house where that cell had been living, killing three of them including Ted.⁷⁴ "My friends' deaths prevented more death," Mark Rudd wrote in a March 2020 op-ed for the *New York Times*. "A massacre at Fort Dix . . . would have triggered widespread government repression against the larger peace movement."⁷⁵

If Ted Gold died very young, his SDS comrade Bernardine Dohrn has lived a long life, combining radical activism with professional success. Born in Chicago in 1942, Dohrn grew up in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, where she was an all-American student—editor of the school newspaper, prom princess, and member of the National Honor Society. After graduating from the University of Chicago with a law degree in 1967, she went to work for the National Lawyers Guild, a job that brought her to Columbia for that Moratorium convocation in March 1968.⁷⁶

Within a year, Dohrn had become a leader of the SDS Revolutionary Youth faction that issued the radical "Weatherman" manifesto calling for "the destruction of U.S. imperialism and a classless . . . world

communism.” Moving from peaceful anti-war protest to random violence, Dohrn led the Women’s Militia, equipped with clubs and crash helmets, during SDS’s “Days of Rage,” when protesters rampaged through the streets of Chicago in October 1969, smashing windows and fighting the police. After that debacle, the Weathermen met at Flint, Michigan, for a debate over tactics that culminated in Dohrn’s evocation of Charles Manson’s murder of pregnant actress Sharon Tate, her unborn son, and four house guests. “Dig it!” Dohrn said. “First they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them. They even shoved a fork into the victim’s stomach! Wild!” Saluting with forked fingers to celebrate the stabbing of Sharon Tate’s womb, some seventy-five of the most dedicated SDS cadre split into underground cells, like Ted Gold’s in New York City, committed to inchoate violence.⁷⁷

In May 1970, the Weather Underground’s leadership issued a “declaration of war” on the United States and set off at least twenty-four bombs in government and corporate buildings—damaging the peace movement by adopting the very violence it had long condemned. During her ten years underground, Dohrn made the FBI’s “most wanted” list and paired off with the wealthiest of the Weathermen, Bill Ayers, whose father was chairman of Chicago’s electrical utility.⁷⁸

After turning herself in to the FBI in 1980 and paying a \$1,500 fine for bail jumping, Dohrn worked for juvenile justice reforms at Northwestern University’s law clinic, arguably having more social impact than the Weather Underground ever did with all those bombs.⁷⁹

A PILGRIM IN SEARCH OF PEACE

While the distant specter of the Vietnam War led SDS to bomb buildings, Fred Branfman’s five years witnessing the war’s most intense bombing firsthand launched him on a lifelong quest for peace. Born in New York City in 1942, Branfman graduated from the University of Chicago and won a draft deferment by going to Laos in 1967 as a development volunteer in remote villages. As he gained fluency in the Lao language, he frequented refugee camps, where he learned that many had fled the US bombing of a strategic plateau in northeast Laos called the Plain of Jars.⁸⁰

To document the air war, Branfman began collecting drawings and statements from the refugees until the Lao government, responding to pressure from the US embassy, expelled him in 1971. Moving to Washington, he published those drawings in a book, *Voices from the Plain of Jars*, and formed Project Air War to lobby Congress to stop the bombing of Indochina. Influenced by testimony from his Rolodex of celebrity speakers like singer Judy Collins, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and academic Noam Chomsky, Congress, in an unprecedented act, passed legislation that ended all air operations over Laos and Cambodia in August 1973.^{[81](#)}

But Branfman was painfully aware that his work was not done. In 1970, while still in Laos, he wrote an extended analysis of the air war for a book that I co-edited, arguing, with considerable prescience, that the use of airpower and local militia in Laos was a “model for future American counterinsurgency operations in the third world” since it causes “maximum destruction of enemy infrastructure . . . at minimum risk to American lives.”^{[82](#)}

Convinced that the alternative to such devastation lay in converting America’s Cold War military economy to peaceful purposes, Branfman moved to California, home of the nation’s aerospace industry, where he became research director for Governor Jerry Brown. After deciding that the infant computer industry was a viable economic alternative to aerospace, he spent four years, 1979 to 1983, coordinating state support for what his *Washington Post* obituary called “the early high-tech pioneers of Silicon Valley.”^{[83](#)} As he had done earlier in Laos, Branfman had traced technology’s slender thread unerringly into the future.

After he died in 2014, his work was recognized with lengthy, laudatory obituaries in *The Economist* magazine, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. “Fred was brilliant,” said William Goodfellow, the director of the Center for International Policy. “He was one of the intellectual lights of the antiwar movement.”^{[84](#)}

THE IMPACT OF PROTEST

If the men on the spot achieved their heroic aura as covert warriors during the Cold War’s first two decades, activists like those above and their reform

movements played a significant role in its last two decades by advocating a peaceful resolution of this global conflict.

In considering the tactics they adopted, it seems clear that violence had a counter-productive impact. During the 1960s, most of the countries with large student movements also spawned radical cells that engaged in extreme violence, including kidnapping, killing, and terror bombings. The Red Army Faction in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Japanese Red Army, the Tupamaros in Uruguay, and the Weather Underground in the United States could not realistically challenge the heavily militarized security states formed to fight the Cold War. By contrast, the peaceful protest movements of the 1960s proved effective in changing the political culture of many countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

According to historian Jeremi Suri, youth counterculture “was both a product of the Cold War and an agent of its transformation.” While Washington was desperate to end divisive anti-war protests at home and abroad, Moscow needed to calm restive students and workers in its Eastern bloc by shifting from military to consumer spending. After President Johnson suggested arms limitation talks in 1967 at the height of anti-Vietnam protests that condemned him as a warmonger, the two superpowers signed agreements in Moscow in May 1972 promising “peaceful coexistence” and limiting nuclear weapons through the Strategic Arms Limitation agreement, or SALT.I. On a parallel but separate Eurocentric track, West Germany chancellor Willy Brandt tried to “break through the frozen front between East and West” by signing treaties in 1970 with both Poland and the Soviet Union, agreeing to the inviolability of existing borders, including those between East and West Germany. Two years later, Brandt’s government negotiated a treaty of mutual recognition between the two Germanys, paving the way for the UN to admit them both in September 1973.⁸⁵

As the culmination of détente, thirty-five nations from East and West, including both Moscow and Washington, met in Finland in August 1975 to sign the Helsinki Accords, recognizing both the inviolability of Europe’s borders and basic human rights within those borders. Although Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev hailed the treaty as a triumph that confirmed the West’s acceptance of his sphere in Eastern Europe, the agreement contained a commitment to human rights that helped dissidents there loosen Moscow’s grip, unleashing forces that would ultimately lead to the

dissolution of the Soviet empire. Four years later at Vienna, Brezhnev and President Jimmy Carter signed the SALT II Treaty, which limited their nuclear arsenals to 2,250 “delivery vehicles.”⁸⁶

In retrospect, such diplomacy succeeded only in setting some rules of engagement for continuing the Cold War, albeit in a less dangerous manner, instead of ending it. Indeed, such détente reduced the threat of a direct superpower confrontation over Europe, but the Cold War still segued into its next dismal phase, from 1975 to 1990, through surrogate warfare in more remote regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. With the great powers “frozen” into a world order organized only for endless conflict, more mass protests, inspired by those of the Vietnam era, would later play a catalytic role in finally ending the Cold War.



Norman Reddaway (right), assistant under secretary of Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Kristo Bulajic (left), director-general of Yugoslavia's Federal Commission for Cultural Relations, signing a cultural exchange, Foreign Office, London, December 13, 1973. (Credit: Alamy)

CHAPTER 10

JAKARTA IS COMING

On a steamy day in July 2001, an anonymous summer intern from the National Security Archive, a private research organization, was browsing the cluttered shelves at the US Government Publishing Office on Capitol Hill. Noticing a thick book stamped with the gold seal of the State Department, the intern brought a copy to the cash register for checkout—unwittingly breaking a CIA embargo on the volume’s release. That book, with the innocuous title *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXVI, Indonesia; Malaysia-Singapore; Philippines*, was part of an official history the State Department had published almost every year since 1861 and already totaled nearly four hundred volumes. Now, for the first time in over a hundred years, a government agency was seeking to suppress, if not destroy, part of that official history.¹ Why was the CIA trying to conceal a volume covering US relations with a far-off country over thirty years earlier?

After the National Security Archive scanned the book and posted it on the Internet, scholars and journalists soon learned that the official reticence could be ascribed to a few slender but significant revelations. In marked contrast to long-standing denials of any American role in a military coup that had massacred a million Indonesian communists, the volume showed that the US embassy had been deeply complicit, delivering lists of communist leaders “being used by Indonesian security authorities” for the slaughter of those very communists.² Through such revelations, the official story began an unraveling that continues to the present day, showing American and British involvement in the greatest mass murder of the Cold War era.

Through its close relationship with the Indonesian army, the American embassy exercised the preponderant external influence in those events. However, recently declassified records have also established that, in 1965–

66, Great Britain conducted a sophisticated psychological warfare campaign that may well have intensified the massacre of Indonesia's Communist Party, or PKI—thereby transforming the country from a neutralist nation closely aligned with Communist China into a bastion of the Western alliance.

As a critical part in what may have been the West's greatest victory in the entire Cold War, those events challenge us to explain how psychological warfare, or psywar, could inflame indigenous political passions for such sustained and staggering slaughter. Exploration of psywar's seminal role leads us to an obscure British Foreign Office official, Norman Reddaway, whose mastery of those dark arts made him London's man on the spot in Southeast Asia. It also reveals the critical work of a clandestine British psywar unit, the Information Research Department, which, according to a specialist, was "one of the most secretive British agencies in the whole of the Cold War," with skilled writers like George Orwell and Arthur Koestler on its payroll.³

Those extraordinary events in Indonesia represent both change and continuity within the US strategy for fighting the Cold War. As the global conflict intensified into a third decade, Washington became willing, in its worldwide struggle to check the spread of communism, to sanction the CIA's descent into a ruthless realpolitik that would lead to systemic torture in South Vietnam, an alliance with General Pinochet's brutal regime in Chile, and, above all, support for mass murder in Indonesia. Simultaneously, as the US maintained its established policy of supporting "absolute monarchies, dictatorships, and juntas" to fight the Cold War, the CIA continued manipulating elections and promoting coups in many countries on its side of the Iron Curtain, thereby assuring that the occupants of various presidential palaces would be reliably pro-Western.⁴

To understand how this wave of dictatorship swept across the world, Indonesia provides a telling example of a global pattern. After independence in 1949, Jakarta became the capital of a reasonably promising parliamentary democracy for eighty million Indonesians living in an archipelago of thirteen thousand islands that stretched for three thousand miles along the equator. But internal problems, compounded by a CIA paramilitary intervention in 1957–58, led to President Sukarno's subsequent imposition of an authoritarian "Guided Democracy," as he called it. The final blow came in 1966 when the military, led by General Suharto and

supported by the US embassy, took power amid the massacre of a million people, and then used that terror to entrench an authoritarian regime for the next thirty-two years.

Commentators then and now have noted the significance of these events. Writing in mid-1966, while the Indonesian military was still slaughtering suspected communists, *New York Times* columnist James Reston celebrated that “savage transformation of Indonesia.”⁵ Indeed, at the close of the Cold War in 1990, Robert J. Martens, a former US embassy employee, told the *Washington Post* that he had given the Indonesian military a list of communists, admitting, “I probably have a lot of blood on my hands, but that’s not all bad.”⁶ In a 2017 retrospective, investigative reporter Vincent Bevins concluded that these events “constituted a major turning point in the Cold War.”⁷

As the Cold War and its ideological passions recede into the past, Washington’s view that the massacre of a million people was not a tragedy but a victory requires some explanation. By the mid-1960s, the communist PKI seemed dangerously close to seizing power, threatening the shipping lanes from the Middle East’s oil fields through the Strait of Malacca to industrial Japan. Even the possibility of such a serious geopolitical rupture made Washington all too willing to destroy Indonesia’s government with unchecked violence.

THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY

Those traumatic events of 1965 were the culmination of two tempestuous decades of political history. After fighting for four years to win its independence from Dutch colonial rule in 1949, Indonesia’s volatile politics moved from democracy toward dictatorship, unleashing tensions that would both culminate in and contribute to those massacres. By the time Indonesia achieved independence, a full decade of wartime occupation and anti-colonial revolution had left the country’s economy in ruins. And during the first decade of independence, it would stagnate further while the population surged from eighty-three million in 1950 to one hundred million in 1960. Compounding such difficulties, inflation rose by 100 percent from 1950 to 1957, putting almost intolerable economic pressure on ordinary Indonesians.⁸

Despite such pressing problems, the republic's first years of parliamentary rule from 1950 to 1956 produced many of the elements for a functioning democracy—notably, a free press, multiparty elections, and an innovative foreign policy. Among the plethora of the forty-plus parties competing for the 257 seats in parliament, Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama were the largest representatives of the country's majority-Muslim population. The Indonesian National Party was essentially the party of officialdom, with support from civil servants, Javanese villagers, and outer-island Christians and Hindus under the loose leadership of President Sukarno, who was supposed to be above partisan politics. In a stunning rebirth after the bloody defeat of its abortive revolt against the republic in 1948, the PKI became, under its chairman D. N. Aidit, the world's largest communist party outside the Iron Curtain and one of the largest political parties in Indonesia, capturing 16 percent of the vote in the multiparty 1955 elections, only six percentage points less than the National Party's leading 22 percent.⁹

While domestic politics were fractious, President Sukarno's foreign policy had a clear trajectory. Though maintaining amicable relations with the US, Indonesia also recognized Communist China in 1953 and the countries' two capitals exchanged ambassadors. In April 1955, Indonesia hosted the first meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement at Bandung. Representing more than half of humanity, twenty-nine nations agreed to pursue a neutral path between the Cold War's bipolar division, offering a major challenge to the US global order.¹⁰

In those same years, however, forces beyond partisan politics began to roil the republic's fundamental stability. Split between professional commanders and regional militia, its military remained divided and politically problematic. Reflecting strong centrifugal pressures, in 1957–58 regional military leaders on the islands of Sumatra and Sulawesi launched revolts that the CIA tried unsuccessfully to exploit through covert intervention. In the aftermath of that failure, Washington brought some four thousand Indonesian officers to the US for training between 1959 and 1965 and also provided \$59 million in military aid to the Indonesian army, thereby encouraging its growing anti-communism. Moreover, densely populated rural Java, long divided between an elite of devout Muslim landowners and a mass of poor peasants, experienced a new source of division as the communist PKI built ever greater support there. These crises

and a weak, postcolonial economy led to a growing political instability, pushing the republic's leaders toward a distinctive form of quasi-dictatorship called "Guided Democracy."¹¹

GUIDED DEMOCRACY (1959–65)

In February 1957, President Sukarno proclaimed his "concept" of "Guided Democracy," and two years later implemented the idea by replacing a decentralized parliamentary democracy with autocratic executive authority. Although a charismatic leader and moving speaker, Sukarno had taken on an impossible role. In a bid to embody the nation's fragile unity, he placed himself at the epicenter of Indonesia's politics, balancing the communists, conservative Muslims, and the military, a task equivalent to the trick of juggling hand grenades. Looking back, it seemed only a matter of time before his juggling act exploded.

Returning to the spellbinding rhetoric of the anti-colonial struggle, Sukarno tried to foster national unity by fighting foreign enemies—first the Dutch over their rump colony of Papua on the island of New Guinea and then the British over the merger of their colonies in north Borneo with peninsular Malaya to form the nation of Malaysia. In the process, Sukarno led the country in a flight from economic reality into a fantasy of perpetual revolution. Through eloquent, emotive speeches that captivated audiences of a hundred thousand or more, Sukarno's vision of the future became the nation's destiny. For nearly a quarter-century, his radio addresses were heard by millions in homes and village squares and made him, in historian John Roosa's words, Indonesia's "visionary prophet leading it into the future." A complex, brilliant man, Sukarno's political imagination was ablaze with competing ideological influences—Javanese mysticism, Balinese spirituality, Marxist anti-imperialism, Islamic anti-Westernism, and Japanese fascism. With a mere turn of phrase he merged the seemingly contradictory concepts of "*nasionalisme*, *agama* [religion], and *komunisme*" into a state ideology he called NASAKOM. Drawing upon such disparate influences, in August 1964 Sukarno challenged the nation to join him in what he called "the year of living dangerously."¹²

There was, however, a central contradiction in the politics of his "guided democracy." By declaring himself "president for life" in 1963 and making

army chief Abdul Haris Nasution his enforcer, Sukarno elevated the military to the epicenter of politics. Yet he would spend the next three years trying to restrain its increasing influence until the contradiction erupted in the bloody cataclysm of October 1965. As head of a quasi-authoritarian state, Sukarno struggled to maintain a delicate, even dangerous balance among four contending social forces—the communist PKI, the army, the Muslim parties, and the outer islands. By actively campaigning in support of Guided Democracy, the PKI built an impressive mass base of two million members and twenty million supporters. By the time a clash came in 1965, however, the army had developed a countervailing political capacity—including elite commando squads, autonomous regional commanders, a potent anti-communist ideology, and ties to conservative Muslim groups—to challenge both the PKI's mass base and Sukarno's seemingly limitless powers.¹³

With political parties sidelined under Guided Democracy, the army used Sukarno's anti-imperialist foreign policy to become the country's strongest political force. When the Dutch began planning independence for Papua, their rump colony in the western half of New Guinea, Sukarno declared his intention to invade and solicited military aid from the Soviet Union. After his army chief Nasution returned from Moscow in January 1961 with a \$450 million arms agreement, the military swelled to three hundred thousand troops armed with new Soviet weaponry. In the end, an armed clash was only avoided after Washington worked through the UN to transfer the Dutch colony of Papua to Indonesia by 1963.¹⁴

After the Papua crisis was resolved, Sukarno plunged into a full-blown military and diplomatic "Confrontation," or Konfrontasi, with the emerging nation of Malaysia. In 1963, he was outraged when Britain merged its remaining colonies of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo with peninsular Malaya to form a federation that seemed to him suspiciously neocolonial. After Indonesian troops attacked a Sarawak police station in April and Sukarno denounced both Malaysia and neo-colonialism, the communists brought thousands of demonstrators into the streets of the capital Jakarta for anti-imperialist rallies that culminated in the burning of the British embassy in September. Determined to prevent an escalation of the crisis into open warfare, the British, operating from their military bases in nearby Singapore, used covert action to check Sukarno's military moves in both Borneo and peninsular Malaysia. From the start, the British Army

incorporated psychological warfare into their operations and began a close collaboration with the Psywar Section of the Malaysian government. By the time crisis struck Jakarta in October 1965, Britain had been engaged in information warfare against Indonesia for two full years, creating ample assets for an effective psywar campaign against Sukarno.¹⁵

As the Indonesian military massed troops along its Borneo border to harass the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, Sukarno tried several stratagems to counterbalance the army's increased influence. To reduce General Nasution's authority, he appointed his own loyalist, Air Marshal Omar Dhani, to head the Vigilance Command and assigned it overall responsibility for Konfrontasi. Concerned over its loss of power, the army maneuvered to restrict Marshal Dhani's command and "starve" his Borneo deputy, General Achmad Subardjo, of well-equipped troops. In January 1965, to further marginalize these Sukarno loyalists, the army assigned operational control over Borneo and Sumatra to General Suharto, a Nasution ally who headed the army's Strategic Reserve.¹⁶

Although President Sukarno made additional personnel moves to restrain the military's growing influence, his ultimate weapon would prove to be an alliance with the communist PKI and a diplomatic démarche toward China. With Sukarno's tacit support, in 1963–64 the PKI launched a "unilateral action" campaign in rural Java to implement a land reform law passed three years earlier, organizing tenant farmers to seize property from wealthy Muslim landlords and thereby unleashing a tempest of localized violence. In response, regional military commanders, Muslim landlords, and local National Party branches formed an effective alliance to fight the PKI, forcing the party to focus on Jakarta where its leaders began playing courtier politics to win power.¹⁷

Backed by his alliance with the communists, in 1964–65 Sukarno decided it was time to lead the nation on that "year of living dangerously" by launching an intensified struggle against imperialism. Consequently, he expanded military operations against Malaysia, severed relations with past Western patrons, and cultivated a special entente with China. After telling a mass audience in March 1964, "America—go to hell with your aid," Sukarno launched eighteen months of diatribes against US imperialism. That November, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai offered Indonesia's foreign minister, Dr. Subandrio, a hundred thousand small arms for a "fifth force," a popular militia under Sukarno's control. As it turned out, the military would

maneuver, successfully, to delay its implementation without angering the president.¹⁸

On October 16, 1964, China detonated its first nuclear bomb, making it, in the context of the Cold War, a major world power. Three months later, Sukarno withdrew from the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank to protest Malaysia's election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. With China's support, he declared a "Jakarta-Phnom Penh-Hanoi-Peking-Pyongyang axis" and formed an alternative to the UN that he called the CONEFO, or Council of the New Emerging Forces. Simultaneously, he announced that Beijing would assist Indonesia in building its own atomic bomb (though a year later China's foreign minister, Chen Yi, would say that such atomic aid was "not realistic").¹⁹

After playing off the army against the communists for so long, Sukarno's balancing act began to wobble. On August 4, 1965, he collapsed at an official function from a chronic kidney ailment, signaling to everyone that the strong man was no longer so strong and that the time for action had come.²⁰ By then, Indonesian politics had come to revolve around the presidential palace, replete with plots, intrigues, and rumor. As mobs began marching in the streets of Jakarta, landlords and tenants battled in rural Java, and the economy disintegrated, plots whirled about the presidential palace. When the news of Sukarno's collapse reached Beijing, PKI leader Aidit met with Mao Zedong, revealing that the party was now considering a military option. China's leader stated that "the Indonesian right wing is determined to seize power" and asked, "Are you determined too?" Aidit nodded in the affirmative, adding: "We plan to establish a military committee. The majority of that committee would be left wing, but it should also include some middle elements. . . . This military committee should not last for too long. . . . After it has been established, we need to arm the workers and peasants in a timely fashion."²¹

In response to rumors that a secret "council of generals" was planning a coup set for early October, Aidit, with the help of Air Marshal Omar Dhani, threw his support behind military training for some two thousand PKI allies at Jakarta's Halim Air Base. With the backing of Aidit and the rest of the PKI Politburo, the party's secretive Special Bureau, which was charged with infiltrating the army, cultivated ties with as many as seven hundred sympathetic officers and used those contacts to plan a preemptive putsch

apparently aimed at changing the army's high command. Whatever their leadership's precise plans were, they were not shared beyond an inner circle, leaving the mass party membership unprepared and vulnerable to violence when it came.²²

THE COMMUNIST PUTSCH

Over the span of three days in late 1965, all the tensions that had built up during the long years of Guided Democracy erupted in an explosive succession of events that remains, even sixty years later, clouded by both confusion and controversy. Simply put, on the night of September 30, 1965, elements of several of the army's elite divisions, the air force, and the communist party's leadership launched a military putsch in the capital city of Jakarta that sparked a successful counter coup by the army's high command and led to the subsequent slaughter of the country's communists.

In that historical tragedy, there were six key actors. The apparent architect of events, PKI head Aidit, promoted the putsch as a "classic tactic in a war of maneuver" against right-wing generals who threatened his party's survival.²³ As President Sukarno's trusted ally and a communist sympathizer, Air Marshal Omar Dhani made Halim Air Base on the eastern side of Jakarta the command center for the putsch. The head of the Palace Guard, Lieutenant Colonel Untung Syamsuri, led the key insurgent forces, aided by the deputy head of the Vigilance Command, General Supardjo, who played a secondary yet significant role as the rebels' emissary to the president—an inversion of the military hierarchy that undoubtedly contributed to the coup's incompetent execution. President Sukarno himself met with the plotters after the putsch started, but he apparently had no prior knowledge of it. As commander of the army's Strategic Reserve, General Suharto likely had an advance warning of the plot and was well positioned to play a pivotal role by mobilizing forces that would mount a military counter coup against the PKI's putsch.

Those actors had lead roles in a historical drama that played out in four distinct acts over three days, with the capital city as its stage. On the night of September 30, 1965, Lieutenant Colonel Untung, operating from Halim Air Base, dispatched seven trucks with rebel troops assigned to arrest seven top army generals, aiming to decapitate the military in a single bold stroke.

Although the rebel contingents successfully kidnapped three of the generals, several of them resisted. General Nasution, chief of the armed forces, jumped over the back wall of his house and took sanctuary in the Iraqi ambassador's home. But the plotters killed his five-year-old daughter and captured his military aide, an army lieutenant. The conspirators also killed army commander Ahmad Yani and two more generals at their homes. By 5:30 a.m. on October 1, the rebels had returned to a wooded area near Halim Air Base called the "crocodile pit" (Lubang Buaya), with three generals, the lieutenant, and the bodies of the three murdered officers.²⁴

In the hours after midnight on this first day of the putsch, about two thousand members and affiliates of the PKI, including party chair Aidit, the Gerwani women's group, and the People's Youth militia, assembled at Halim Air Base. Simultaneously, a thousand rebel troops from the army's 454th and 530th battalions occupied the vast Merdeka Square in downtown Jakarta, taking control of the Presidential Palace and the national communications center. In central Java, middle-ranking officers in the Diponegoro Division seized command of several infantry battalions.²⁵

After those preliminary moves, roughly a thousand lightly armed rebel troops loitered around Merdeka Square for the rest of the day, failing to consolidate their control over the capital. Most critically, the rebels did not occupy the Strategic Reserve Headquarters on the eastern side of the square, allowing their main opponents, General Suharto and his allies, to come and go freely as they organized their counter coup. At about 7:15 a.m., the putsch leaders went on radio to announce the formation of the "30 September Movement" with the aim of defending President Sukarno from a "counterrevolutionary coup" by a group called "the Council of Generals," which, the broadcast said, "harbored evil designs against the Republic."²⁶

During the day, however, the coup began collapsing. For several hours, the rebel leaders searched desperately for the president, who had spent the night at his third wife's home. At about 9:00 a.m., President Sukarno turned up at Halim Air Base, where he had several meetings with General Supardjo, first telling him to shut down the revolt and then focusing on the selection of an army commander to succeed the murdered General Yani. At about 1:30 p.m., he appointed a loyalist committed to his anti-imperialist struggle, General Pranoto Reksosamudro, as army commander and called him to Halim for consultations. Meanwhile, the rebels had shot the four captured officers and dumped their bodies, along with those of the three

already killed, down an old well in that nearby area called Lubang Buaya. During that day, the putsch group made three radio announcements, dismissing the current cabinet and transferring power to a Revolution Council with forty-five members, which PKI chair Aidit saw as “a rival organization to the Council of Generals” that could catalyze changes in the cabinet, much as the ongoing putsch hoped to change the army command.²⁷

At about 7:00 a.m. as these dramatic public moves began to unfold during the coup’s first day on October 1, General Suharto appeared quietly at Strategic Reserve Headquarters facing Merdeka Square and assumed interim command of the army in the aftermath of General Yani’s death. By nightfall, General Suharto had taken control of Merdeka Square, convincing the rebels’ 530th battalion to surrender and the 454th to retreat to coup headquarters at Halim Air Base. While the rebels’ leadership dithered and their troops loitered without clear direction, General Suharto’s forces occupied the radio station and other key offices in central Jakarta. At 10:00 p.m., Suharto himself made a national radio address, announcing that six generals had been kidnapped and declaring, in words that would soon echo across the archipelago, that the rebel movement “must be destroyed down to its roots.” An hour later, the putsch principals fled Halim Air Base—PKI chair Aidit to Yogyakarta, Air Marshal Omar Dhani to Madiun, and President Sukarno to the nearby city of Bogor. By the end of day one, the putsch plotters had lost control of the capital.²⁸

At dawn on October 2, Special Forces loyal to General Suharto advanced on Halim Air Base and secured it without a fight. With the putsch effectively ended in Jakarta, its last act would be played out in east and central Java. At the old royal city of Yogyakarta, the PKI massed for a march in support of the putsch. Hearing news of the coup’s collapse in the capital, however, the rebel units of the Diponegoro Division fled into forests on the slopes of Mount Merapi and their officers offered to surrender. By the evening of October 2, the putsch was over, both in the capital and the countryside.²⁹

Throughout October 3, General Suharto moved quickly to consolidate his position, which was not strong since he was not well known outside the army. He pressed President Sukarno to appoint him army commander to assist the restoration of order, but the president refused. Nonetheless, he continued to insist and ten days later the president finally relented. On October 4, General Suharto’s troops exhumed the bodies of the six

murdered generals from a well at Lubang Buaya, bruised and badly decomposed in the tropical heat, prompting him to deliver another broadcast condemning the “barbaric actions” of the rebel movement while ominously claiming that the PKI’s People’s Youth militia and the Communist women of Gerwani had been present at Lubang Buaya where the killings had occurred. On October 5, the army staged a massive public funeral for the murdered generals that displayed their damaged bodies—a grisly spectacle that would become fuel for the propaganda that soon sparked a slaughter of the PKI.³⁰

THE COUP’S BLOODY AFTERMATH

Despite the extraordinary drama of those three days, surprisingly little had changed at the apex of the Indonesian state, setting the stage for a subterranean, six-month power struggle. Though weakened by escalating attacks on his vocal supporters in the PKI, Sukarno remained the president with strong popular support. The foremost advocate for his anti-Western, pro-China policies, Dr. Subandrio, was still foreign minister. After surviving the assassination attempt, General Nasution continued as defense minister. But beneath that visible surface of continuity, General Suharto and his growing network of military allies used an ongoing anti-communist campaign to accumulate power.

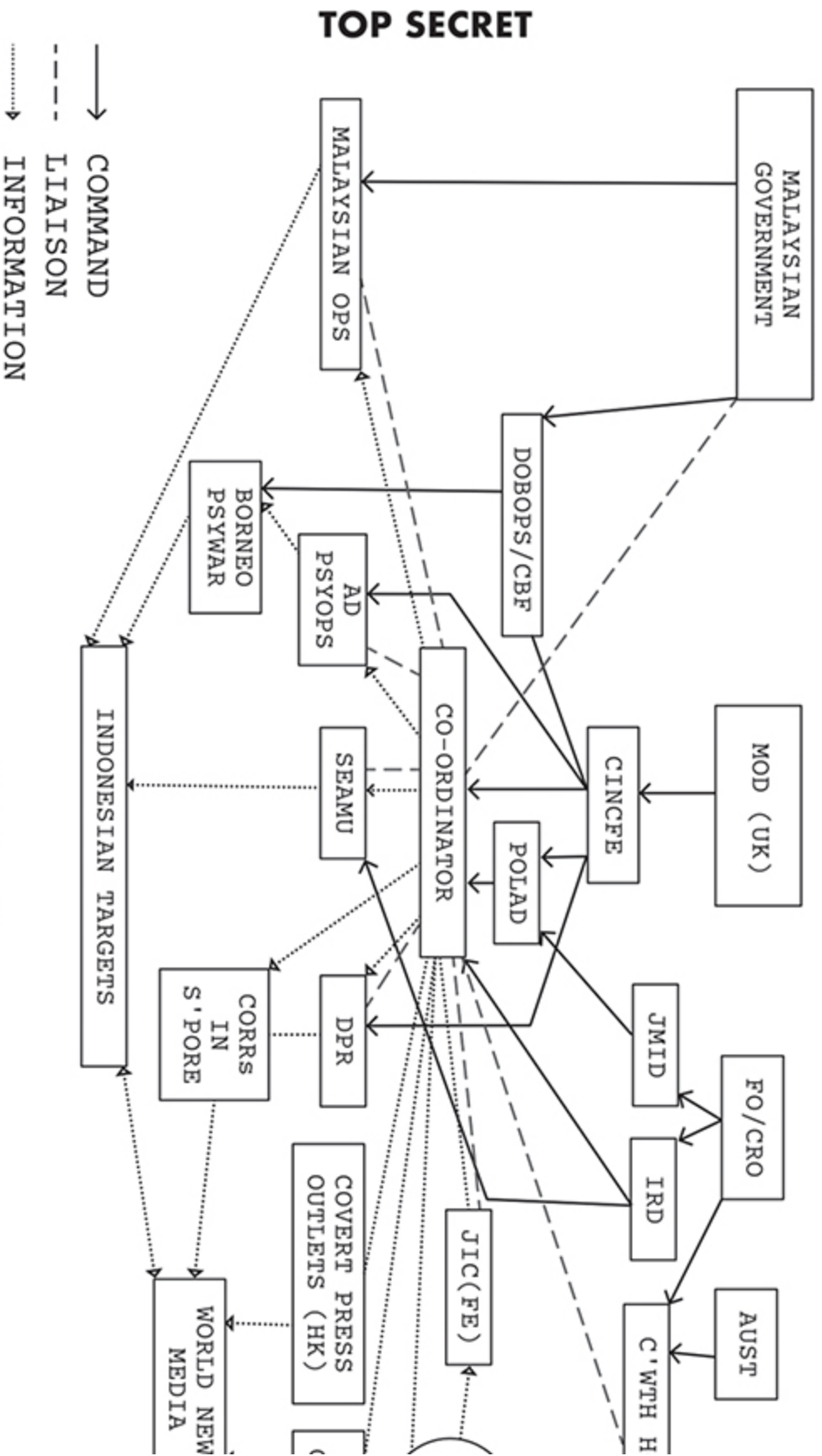
Both the American and British embassies at Jakarta, along with their respective secret services, seized on the coup’s chaos as a heaven-sent opportunity to oust President Sukarno, long the *bête noire* of the West’s anti-communist effort in the region. When the British ambassador suggested distributing “a ‘black’ news and propaganda sheet,” their Information Research Department (IRD) unit in neighboring Singapore, where the British still had military bases, tried to expand its psywar operations of a “black nature.” But the IRD officers soon found their initiatives were blocked by “a jungle of clearances.” To cut through this bureaucratic red tape, Norman Reddaway, an IRD psywar expert with “much experience in this field in the Middle East,” arrived in Singapore right after the October coup in Jakarta. With broad authority to direct all propaganda as the “Coordinator of Political Warfare” and a special budget of £100,000, he had ample autonomy to make him London’s man on the spot in Southeast Asia.

In a chart the British military later drew to schematize the psywar campaign it had launched against President Sukarno and his leftwing allies, the “Coordinator” (Reddaway) was the central figure, with all authority from above leading toward him and all information moving outward from him to “London outlets,” “Covert Press Outlets” in Hong Kong, and “Correspondents in S’pore,” and thence to “World News Media” and “Indonesian Targets.”^{[31](#)}

By education and experience, Reddaway was well prepared for this challenging assignment. After studying modern languages at Cambridge University, he had served with the “Phantom” psywar unit active in Europe and the Middle East during World War II. In 1947, to counter what he called Russia’s “very large research and opinion-influencing organization,” Reddaway helped found the Foreign Office’s IRD, which initially favored accurate information to protect the BBC’s reputation for reliable news. But in contested areas like the Middle East, the IRD increasingly turned to disinformation, known in the trade as “black propaganda.” During the 1956 Hungarian crisis when Soviet troops occupied Budapest, Reddaway used the Reuters wire service to spread anti-Soviet news worldwide. In an extraordinary psywar coup, he even managed to get IRD’s analysis of the Soviet invasion of that country adopted almost verbatim as the UN’s official report. Based in Beirut for four years before his transfer to Singapore, Reddaway headed IRD operations in the Middle East, placing what he called “anti-communist articles in the vernacular press” and likely gaining familiarity with Muslim societies since they were the target of his propaganda. By the mid-1960s, the IRD, with 360 employees worldwide, had developed into a sophisticated propaganda instrument without peer in the West, attacking, sometimes successfully, Egypt’s Gamal Nasser, Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, and other leaders deemed antithetical to British interests.^{[32](#)}

TOP SECRET

PRINCIPAL FUNCTIONS OF POLITICAL WARFARE CO-ORDINATOR 1965-66





TOP SECRET

When he arrived in Singapore during the first week of October 1965 for what became a ten-month tour of duty, Reddaway was, according to his Foreign Office colleague Derek Tonkin, already known as “a bit of a loose cannon.” He and his team were “rather a law unto themselves,” Tonkin added, “but the FO [Foreign Office] knew that he would be when they appointed him.” For two years prior to Reddaway’s arrival, the Singapore IRD unit had muted its political propaganda in compliance with British policy that “Sukarno’s own position is invulnerable” and “any attempt to build up an anti-P.K.I. candidate would be counter-productive.” But feeling that “the news moves so fast that the people on the spot need to be licensed to operate without too much reference to London,” Reddaway decided to ignore official policy and use psywar to try to destroy the P.K.I. and fulfill his informal brief “to do anything I could do to get rid of Sukarno.”³³

Operating from the British military’s Phoenix Park base in Singapore, Reddaway launched a covert psywar campaign that included broadcasting inflammatory anti-communist messages into Indonesia from Malaysian radio stations, planting unattributable media leaks to influence international news, and publishing an Indonesian-language newsletter called *Kenjataan2* (Facts) that was sent to 1,500 local outlets and top officials, including Indonesian army commanders. To operate these assets, he was aided by skilled IRD staffers like E. E. “Ed” Wynne, a self-described “cultural anthropologist, a psychologist, a public relations expert and confidence man,” who used those skills to “delve into emotions and ideas, and sometimes the obsessions. . . , which exist in all human beings.” As Reddaway explained at the close of his campaign in July 1966, his psywar had two essential elements. “The news machine was our bludgeon,” he said, “the newsletter and our unorthodox operations our stiletto. The bludgeon was surprisingly effective because we were able . . . to supply publicists with information which they could not find from other sources because of Sukarno’s censorship.”³⁴

With the stiletto inserting inflammatory black propaganda into Indonesia and the bludgeon influencing international news coverage of the country, Reddaway forged a propaganda campaign of almost unprecedented power. Amplifying his impact, the Indonesian military had seized control of the country's media after the coup to propagate anti-communist propaganda, facilitating the formation of a resounding echo chamber. As historian Christopher Hulshof observed, that operation "created a continuous feedback loop that sent the Indonesian Army's propaganda around the world and back into Indonesia, constantly reinforcing local propaganda with foreign media sources."³⁵ While the stiletto may have sharpened the attack on communists inside Indonesia, the bludgeon certainly controlled international press coverage of the country and kept the world, with its human rights concerns, at bay long enough for the army to complete its slaughter of the PKI.

Instead of the "delicate touch" toward Sukarno in past issues, the first newsletter Reddaway published on October 10 turned that publication into a stiletto for a direct attack, calling on readers to "take out from the feeble hands of Sukarno any authority he may have still."³⁶ Illustrating just how sharp that stiletto could be, right after the October coup, Reddaway's unit and its Indonesian allies began circulating propaganda—which proved particularly inflammatory in a patriarchal Muslim society—that members of the communist Gerwani women's group danced naked before a bonfire near Halim Air Base; cut off the generals' genitals; and then, waving the severed members, threw themselves into a crowd of communist cadres for an orgy of blood and semen. Drawing on his service in Southeast Asia, CIA officer Ralph McGehee later described the propaganda this way: "Media fabrications played a key role in stirring up popular resentment against the P.K.I. . . . Photographs of the bodies of the dead generals—badly decomposed—were featured in all the newspapers. . . . Stories accompanying the pictures falsely claimed that the generals had been castrated and their eyes gouged out by Communist women . . . to foment public anger against the Communists and set the stage for a massacre." Using "target lists compiled by the military," McGehee added, allowed right-wing Muslim groups to slaughter five hundred thousand to one million suspected communists.³⁷

On October 9, just a week after the coup, the Jakarta military newspaper *Angkatan Bersendjata* published a story claiming that Gerwani women had

“fondled the genitals of the victims while exposing their own genitals before proceeding to kill the victims with all kinds of tortures and cruelties.” Two days later, the same paper alleged that a murdered lieutenant became “a lewd plaything of the evil women of *Gerwani*”—stories picked up by another army-sponsored paper, *Api*, which reported that a hundred Gerwani women sliced the generals’ genitalia with razor blades. Weaving all these incendiary claims together, in mid-December *Angkatan Bersendjata* reported that Gerwani women had engaged in dancing and fornication as a fifteen-year-old girl served as “lead executioner,” castrating the generals with razor blades while communist coup leader Colonel Untung looked on “laughing out loud.” Illustrating the synergy between Indonesian and British propaganda, Reddaway’s unit distributed a false-flag newsletter in January 1966 claiming a teenaged member of the Gerwani was “one of those ‘honored’ with the task of mutilating the generals.” She was quoted as supposedly saying: “Our platoon leader ordered us to beat the prisoner and then cut his private parts with the small knives.”³⁸

To reach the illiterate masses of Indonesia, Reddaway also arranged for Malaysia’s “black” radio station to broadcast radio dramas like “The Voice from the Well,” which the IRD had produced in its Singapore studio with spectral voices calling out to Sukarno’s foreign minister:

Can you hear us, Subandrio? Of course you can! For you can never close your ears to our voices. The voices you tried to smother in the Well. The voices of us the dead. . . .

Can you banish that spirit of . . . Nasution’s child, who, because of your ambition, was so foully done to death? . . .

We are waiting for you, Subandrio, as we wait for Omar Dhani and for Aidit, for when Allah in his mercy mends our broken bodies, He will break yours and theirs in the Pit of Hell.

And we wait for Sukarno, that poor deluded man . . . blinded by vanity and his pride, . . . not knowing that his country was being sold into slavery.³⁹

With such stiletto-sharp propaganda inflaming anti-communist passions, in the six months following the October putsch army regional commanders mobilized militias, death squads, and citizen groups, including Muslim militants, to murder up to a million people in Bali, Java, and Sumatra. In the

first phase of the killings in October and November 1965, local groups long opposed to the P.K.I. were armed and mobilized by the army to murder tens of thousands of communist leaders and burn many of their houses. In East Java, landlords used the anti-communist campaign to slaughter tenants who had been involved in the P.K.I.'s "direct action" land seizures over the previous two years. In a second phase of killing from late 1965 through mid-1966, the army trucked tens of thousands of detainees to remote rural locations where they were slaughtered and their bodies buried in mass graves. In Bali, the military worked with upper-class landlords and the rival National Party leaders to massacre an estimated eighty thousand suspected communists—about 5 percent of the island's population—who were "shot, knifed, hacked, or clubbed to death."⁴⁰

By using his bludgeon, Reddaway deftly manipulated the international press to plant news stories critical of the P.K.I., President Sukarno, and Foreign Minister Subandrio. For six crucial months, October 1965 to March 1966, Reddaway did not simply influence coverage of the situation in Indonesia; he dominated it, allowing him to attempt a regime change through "black propaganda." In addition to cultivating individual correspondents, Reddaway focused on the wire services, which he found to be "omnivores all around the clock," and government radio stations—which, he said, had a "wide spread"—particularly the BBC and Radio Malaysia. Once Sukarno banned foreign correspondents from the country after the coup, Reddaway became what the operation's official history called "the only purveyor of reliable news about Indonesia," allowing him to "build close relations with resident correspondents," an arrangement he described as "one beautiful friendship . . . in each place"—a UPI reporter in Singapore, an Associated Press correspondent in Hong Kong, and a Reuters reporter in Jakarta. Using what Reddaway called "plenty of means at our disposal for feeding the agencies," he was soon filling the international press every day with at least one slanted news story on the situation in Indonesia.⁴¹

In firing off this burst of dispatches, Reddaway never lost sight of his main quarry, Foreign Minister Subandrio and his patron President Sukarno. "We have improved our techniques of stimulating helpful publicity," he reported in February 1966, hoping that "the Military Tribunal may further harm Subandrio." To advance that possibility, the I.R.D. mailed a forged letter supposedly from a Hong Kong fixer asking one of President Sukarno's

cronies to tell Foreign Minister Subandrio that “all the money business in Geneva has been settled,” implying that stolen funds had been deposited in a secret Swiss account. On March 8, Reddaway forwarded a draft news dispatch to his Hong Kong office, soon released on the AP wire, reporting that Subandrio was “said to be virtually hiding in Sukarno’s palace” from student demonstrators shouting slogans, coined in IRD’s newsletters, that denounced him for “steering Indonesia back towards China.” To intensify the attack on the foreign minister, IRD arranged for two additional broadcasts of “The Voice from the Well” on Malaysia’s “black” radio station.⁴²

Amid this relentless media barrage, Reddaway suddenly found he could sing a silent “Te Deum” at the news from Jakarta. On March 11, 1966, there was major cabinet shake-up—a veritable regime change involving Foreign Minister Subandrio’s arrest, Sukarno’s de facto demotion to caretaker president, and, above all, General Suharto being granted sweeping authority for all actions “deemed necessary” to restore order amid the massacres of communists. In an agile transition, Reddaway quickly recognized that the demand for his news items about President Sukarno was giving way to “questions of what we do for [General] Suharto,” particularly the fate of a \$10 million US aid package for the new regime. “When you consider,” he wrote about his CIA allies, hinting at their payments to support his psywar operations, “how much they pay for Radio Free Europe, the Congress of Cultural Freedom, the Asia Foundation . . . bribes to everyone worth bribing and massive exploitation of their foundations, I am staggered to read that perhaps ten million dollars worth of aid is beyond their covert skills.”⁴³ In May, as he was wrapping up his mission, the political adviser to the British commander in chief in Singapore concluded in a report on Reddaway’s propaganda work that its “impact has been considerable.”⁴⁴

By July, Reddaway was back in London, where his superiors, who had faulted his work at every turn in snide intra-office memos, proved grudging, even demeaning, in their reaction to his triumph as a man on the spot. They did nothing to assist with “the financial side” of his sudden moves to and from Singapore, which, as one colleague commiserated, “turned out wretchedly for you.” Years later, after a distinguished diplomatic career that ended as British ambassador to Poland, Reddaway assessed the overall impact of his psywar efforts, saying: “We got rid of Sukarno probably two or three years earlier than he would have gone anyway in 1965–66 by

getting extremely good information about what was going on in Indonesia and getting it into the right hands” in the press. He made no mention of his psywar campaign’s contribution to the massacre of a million Indonesians.⁴⁵

THE US ROLE IN THE MAKING OF A MASSACRE

Once the slaughter of the communists started, the American embassy tried to aid the Indonesian military by giving it accurate lists of PKI leaders for elimination and providing the press with information justifying such harsh measures. In a cable dated October 5, 1965, the embassy said it was working to “spread the story of the PKI’s guilt, treachery and brutality . . . if we can find [a] way to do it without identifying it as solely or largely U.S. effort.”⁴⁶ Publicly, the embassy tried to downplay the army’s role by encouraging the media to report the anti-communist killings as ordinary Indonesians running amok. Privately, however, the American ambassador to Indonesia, Marshall Green, cabled Washington on October 20: “Army has . . . been working hard at destroying PKI and I, for one, have increasing respect for its determination and organization in carrying out this crucial assignment.”⁴⁷

The embassy also felt, whether accurately or not, that the Indonesian army had poor intelligence on the PKI leadership and prioritized providing it with lists of communist officials. “A sanitized version of the lists in [message number] A-398,” Ambassador Green wrote the State Department in early 1966, “has been made available to the Indonesian Government last December [1965] and is apparently being used by Indonesian security authorities who seem to lack even the simplest overt information on PKI leadership at the time (lists of other officials in the PKI affiliates, Partindo and Baperki, were also provided).”⁴⁸

A key liaison between the embassy and the army was Adam Malik, then a CIA asset and later General Suharto’s foreign minister, who delivered an estimated five thousand PKI names to the military. In December 1965, Ambassador Green proposed a “black bag” payment of 50 million rupiahs (then worth about US\$100,000) for Malik’s anti-communist Kap-Gestapu group, which, he said, was “still carrying burden of current repressive efforts targeted against PKI, particularly in Central Java,” where the killings were becoming a slaughter.⁴⁹

In an airgram to Washington on April 15, 1966, the embassy acknowledged the scale of the killings, saying: “We frankly do not know whether the real figure [of communists killed] is closer to 100,000 or 1,000,000 but believe it wiser to err on the side of the lower estimates, especially when questioned by the press.”⁵⁰ After weighing the evidence, Indonesia specialist Robert Cribb concluded that there was “a death toll as low as 200,000 or high as one million.” More recently, historian Geoffrey Robinson concluded that “500,000 dead must be regarded as a conservative estimate,” and “the true figure might be as high as 1 million.” Whatever the precise number might have been, the killings were sufficient, by February 1966, for Ambassador Green to report that “the Communists . . . have been decimated by wholesale massacre,” and “the PKI has been destroyed as an effective political force.”⁵¹

In the aftermath of the killings, moreover, the army arrested more than a million communist suspects and, five years later, was still holding seventy-five thousand to ninety thousand political prisoners, according to Amnesty International.⁵² Through the combination of mass murder and mass arrests, the Indonesian military ended the threat that the communist PKI might somehow take power.

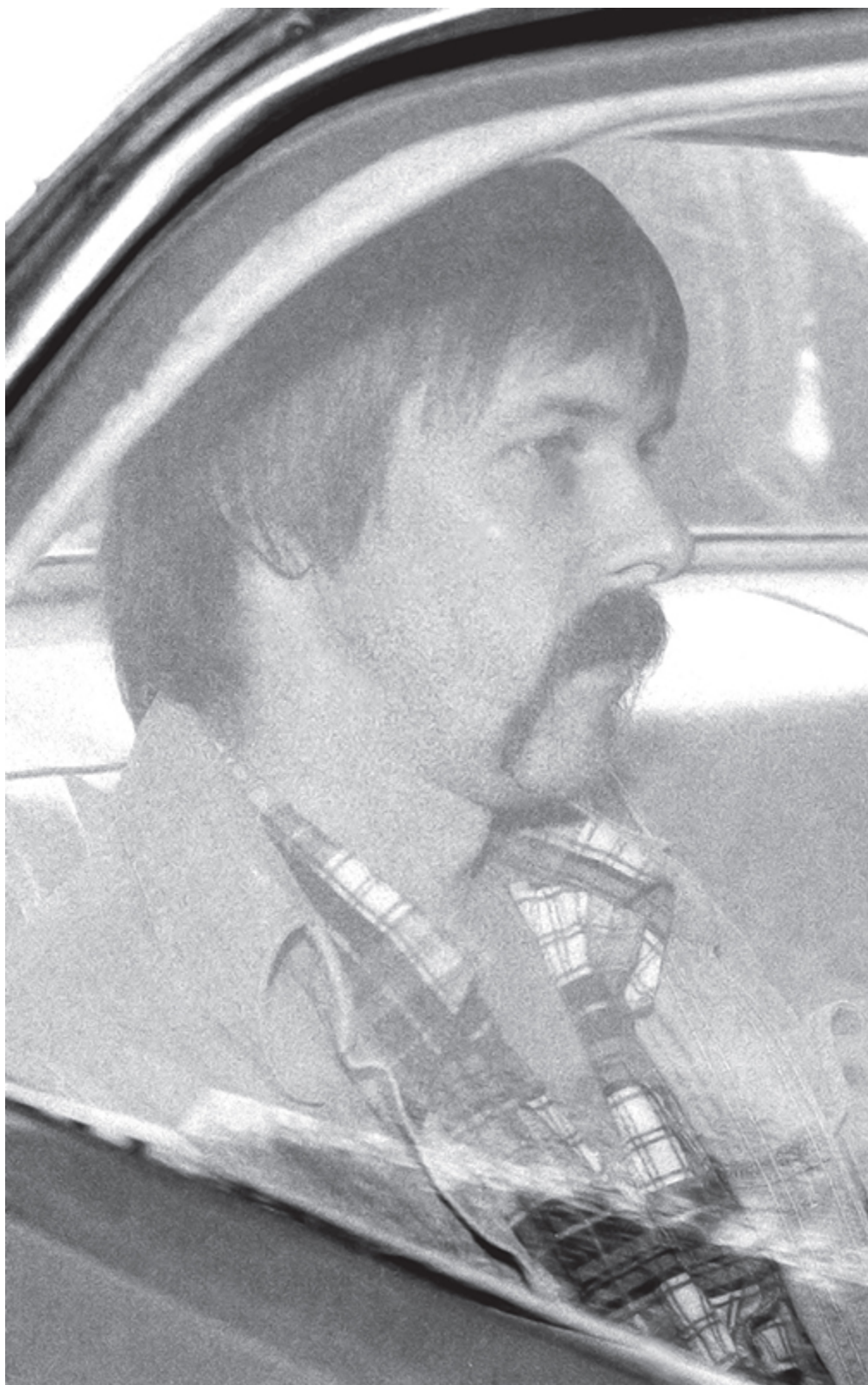
As those massacres continued across the archipelago, General Suharto was maneuvering in Jakarta to take control of the country, purging President Sukarno’s supporters from both the military and parliament. In July 1966, parliament stripped Sukarno of his title as “president for life,” rescinded his power to issue executive decrees, and recommended reversing his foreign policy by rejoining the UN and ending further “Konfrontasi” with Malaysia. A year later, parliament rescinded all of Sukarno’s remaining executive powers and appointed General Suharto as his successor, starting a military dictatorship that would last for the next thirty years.⁵³

THE LEGACY OF A COUNTERCOUP

“Almost overnight,” historian John Roosa has suggested about the impact of the military’s 1965 counter coup, “the Indonesian government went from being a fierce voice for cold war neutrality . . . to a quiet, compliant partner of the U.S. world order.”⁵⁴ Not only was the coup’s impact on Indonesia profound, but it also had wider global implications. Starting in the mid-

1950s, President Sukarno had been part of a generation of spellbinding liberators who gave anti-colonial nationalism a decade of extraordinary influence in international affairs—from the Bandung conference of 1955 through the mid-1960s, when such leaders suddenly lost prominence. In the same year that the Indonesian military ousted Sukarno, the Algerian army toppled President Ahmed Ben Bella, a leading advocate of Third World neutralism. Just a year later, another African liberation leader, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, was also brought down in a coup. The shock of these events and the reverberations of the Sino-Soviet split prevented the convening of Bandung II, a major Afro-Asian conference scheduled for Algiers in late 1965—a cancellation that marked “the tombstone of the Afro-Asian world.”⁵⁵ Although the Non-Aligned Movement would survive as a loose diplomatic entente, states like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria began moving into the Soviet orbit.

In retrospect, Indonesia's 1965 anti-communist coup was so successful, reported journalist Vincent Bevins, that “far-right groups around the world began to draw inspiration from the ‘Jakarta’ model and build copycat programs” that, for instance, “pushed the Latin American death toll into the hundreds of thousands.” Former CIA officer Ralph McGehee reported that the Agency was “extremely proud” of the Indonesian massacre and “recommended it as a model for future operations.”⁵⁶ In the days before the September 1973 military coup that toppled the socialist government in Chile, graffiti began appearing on walls in the capital city of Santiago, reading “Jakarta is Coming”—ominous words indeed.



Following expulsion from Chile, Michael Vernon Townley arrives at a US district court for a hearing about the assassination of former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier, Washington, DC, April 10, 1978. (Credit: AP Photo / Daugherty)

CHAPTER 11

CIA COUP IN CHILE

On November 3, 1970, Salvador Allende, a dedicated Marxist and president-elect, took his oath of office before the Chilean Congress promising to “keep and obey the Constitution.” He then donned a colored sash emblazoned with a gilded national crest, the country’s symbol of executive authority. After a Te Deum mass in Santiago’s Catholic cathedral, he drove five blocks to the presidential palace through throngs of supporters hailing him as “comrade president.” From a balcony on that gray stone building, he addressed the massive crowd, calling on them to join him in “the construction of socialism.” He then swore in his fifteen-member cabinet, including three ministers from the Communist Party, a key component of the coalition that had carried his Socialist Party to victory.¹

The election of the socialist Salvador Allende sparked a profound sense of crisis in Cold War Washington. As in Cuba a decade earlier, the rise of a left-wing government in Chile seemed to threaten US dominance over Latin America, prompting a determined intervention that reveals the growing sophistication of CIA covert operations after more than twenty years of the Cold War.

Although Latin America had served as Washington’s bulwark from the very start of the Cold War, by the 1950s the US had major investments in only a half-dozen countries there. When any of these nations made a serious attempt at social reforms that threatened American economic interests, Washington responded aggressively in the name of anti-communism—in Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in 1961, Brazil in 1964, and now Chile in 1970. In those same years, the CIA determined that “Latin American military juntas were good for the United States,” a realization that encouraged the Agency’s close alliances with the many military regimes that seized power in the region during the Cold War.²

Early CIA interventions in Guatemala and Cuba were ramshackle paramilitary affairs that suffered from poor planning, but its covert action in Chile drew upon a quarter-century of embedded assets in that country for a lethal military coup against Latin America's strongest democracy. To foreclose any possibility that the Chilean left could retain its power or again capture the presidency, the White House of President Richard Nixon mobilized its full panoply of state power—military, diplomatic, economic, and covert—for a centrally controlled intervention that largely eliminated the autonomy needed for an American man on the spot.

Reflecting the bureaucratization of covert operations by midpoint in the Cold War, the CIA's Chile operation was run by Thomas Karamessines, who had started his career as the Agency's man on the spot in Athens back in 1947 and was now, a quarter-century later, its director of covert operations. After working closely with ultra-right groups in Greece and Italy that later staged coups, Karamessines had ample overseas experience to conduct his own coup, albeit remotely from CIA headquarters in Washington. More broadly, the Agency had been fundamentally transformed by the relentless pressures of the Cold War. Once a coterie of clever spies with a deft touch seen in operations like the 1953 Iran coup, the CIA had become a lethal bureaucracy that catalyzed local security agencies for the dirty business of mass mortality in Indonesia, South Vietnam, and now Chile.

LATIN AMERICA AND BRAZIL

For nearly a century before the Chile crisis, Washington had constantly increased its influence over Latin America until it had extended a penumbra of power over the entire region. While dominating the Caribbean region by 1920, the US began to extend its hegemony into South America as well; Brazil was a major recipient of its investments and became a cobelligerent against Germany in both World War I and World War II.³ When the Cold War started in 1947, Brazil quickly cut ties with the Soviet Union, banned the local communist party, and played a key role when Washington signed a mutual-defense pact in its capital, Rio de Janeiro, with most Western Hemisphere nations.⁴

Starting in 1961, however, the leftist President João Goulart began cultivating relations with the Soviet bloc and taxing multinational corporate profits to provide opportunities for the country's impoverished majority. Reacting strongly to another socialist beachhead in the Western Hemisphere so soon after the Cuban revolution, in July 1962 President John F. Kennedy and his ambassador tried to encourage "military action" against Goulart by sending a new army attaché to Brazil: Lieutenant Colonel Vernon Walters, later the deputy director of the CIA. When President Lyndon Johnson decided to maintain that hostile stance, Walters met the Brazilian coup plotters in March 1964 and learned that the army's chief, General Humberto Castelo Branco, was ready to throw "his own very considerable prestige against Goulart." Within days, the military seized control of the country in a well-executed coup, sending Goulart fleeing into exile.⁵

Without even waiting for him to leave the country, Under Secretary of State George Ball telegraphed US recognition of the new military regime—an unconventional move that, said Ball smugly, "worked out beautifully and was very effective."⁶ With General Castelo Branco as its first president, Brazil's military dictatorship would remain in power for the next twenty-one years, almost to the end of the Cold War, using torture, disappearances, and mass arrests to suppress the left, thereby creating a model for Latin America's other military regimes.⁷

Six years later in 1970, the election of socialist Salvador Allende as president of Chile not only raised the specter of a second communist state in the Americas, but it also threatened US control of a critical commodity. Just as oil made the Middle East a strategic region, so Chile, as the CIA reported in 1971, had the Free World's largest copper reserves, conferring genuine geopolitical significance on an otherwise remote country with a relatively small population of just nine million. By 1970, American corporations Anaconda and Kennecott still controlled the country's three main copper mines, Chile's chief source of foreign exchange.⁸

During Chile's 1970 presidential campaign, Salvador Allende's program for nationalizing copper gave Washington ample reason to oppose his election. Apart from the issue of natural resources, his ardent advocacy of socialism also clashed head-on with Washington's determination to prevent the loss of yet another Latin America nation to communism. Through that confluence of circumstances, the Nixon White House would mount a sustained covert effort to stop Allende—first, by intervening to prevent his

election; next, by maneuvering to block him from taking office, and, finally, by overthrowing his government in a military coup.

THE CHARACTER OF CHILE'S DEMOCRACY

The depth of Chile's democratic tradition created a formidable obstacle for the CIA when it came to attempting Allende's overthrow. Like most of Latin America, Chile had a history of colonial conquest and exploitation that left the country, at independence in the 1820s, with a vast social gap between its landed oligarchs and impoverished masses. With the end of a civil war among rival elite factions in 1891, conservative leaders established parliamentary governance and opened Chile to foreign investment, allowing New York's Guggenheim family to develop massive copper mines at Chuquibambilla and El Teniente, soon making Chile a major global producer of this critical commodity.⁹

Even under such adverse conditions, Chileans began to develop a democratic tradition, which slowly, painfully, became the most resilient in Latin America. To loosen the oligarchy's tight grip on state power, the left wing mobilized through workers' organizations. Despite determined opposition, reformist president Arturo Alessandri attempted to tackle Chilean problems such as agrarian reform and economic inequality, prompting the country's military command to send him into exile in 1924. Within months, however, insurgent officers brought Alessandri back from exile to ratify the Chilean Constitution of 1925. For the next forty years, the country had an unbroken record of electoral competition between left and right free from mass violence or military coups. That tradition of constitutional governance benefited from a military that was, as CIA officer David Atlee Phillips put it, a "model of democratic rectitude," creating one of the biggest challenges the CIA would face in finding a leader for its 1973 coup.¹⁰

During the early years of the Cold War, the electoral competition between left and right continued, with the communists and socialists forging a coalition in 1958 to support the presidential candidacy of Salvador Allende, who campaigned on nationalizing the copper mines, against the conservative Jorge Alessandri, the former president's son. Significantly, Allende missed winning the presidency by only 3 percent, prompting a

sustained CIA intervention that by 1973 would provide the Agency with deeply embedded anti-communist assets.¹¹

In 1964, the moderate Eduardo Frei ran on the Christian Democratic ticket, while the communist-socialist coalition again backed Allende.¹² During the campaign, the CIA provided covert financial support for Frei's candidacy, including \$2.6 million in direct aid and \$3 million for a "massive anti-communist propaganda campaign."¹³ After winning the election, Frei conducted a "Chileanization" of American copper companies by purchasing 51 percent of Kennecott's operations and a lesser share of Anaconda's through a "mutual agreement" that allowed the US to retain some control over that strategic sector.¹⁴

Faced with the likelihood that Allende's leftist coalition would appeal to voters in the coming 1970 elections, Washington supported Frei's government with a massive aid program totaling \$1.2 billion, second only to Brazil's in Latin America.¹⁵ Simultaneously, the CIA infiltrated the country's media, particularly the country's leading newspaper, *El Mercurio*, while also mounting an anti-communist organizing effort among diverse sectors of Chilean society.¹⁶ Despite his many attempts at reform, at the close of Frei's term in 1970 a combination of foreign dominance and economic inequality would provide ample fuel for Allende's next campaign.¹⁷

THE 1970 ELECTION

Three months before Chile's presidential election in September 1970, the US National Security Council's 40 Committee, which supervised covert operations globally, approved \$935,000 for "spoiling operations" to prevent Allende's election. Using its extensive media assets in Chile, the CIA conducted an intensive propaganda campaign, exemplified by *El Mercurio*, which published at least one anti-communist editorial daily during the election season.¹⁸

Nonetheless, in September 1970, Allende's Popular Unity coalition won 36.6 percent of the vote against Nationalist Party candidate Jorge Alessandri's 35.3 percent (a margin of only forty thousand votes), while a third party trailed with 28.1 percent. Since no candidate had received a

majority, the final decision was delayed until October when the Chilean Congress was to decide the winner.¹⁹

At a meeting with National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger and CIA director Richard Helms on September 15, 1970, President Richard Nixon ordered an anti-Allende coup. According to the rough notes that Helms jotted down during the meeting, Nixon said a coup would have “1 in 10 chance perhaps, but save Chile!, worth spending, not concerned risks involved, no involvement of embassy, \$10,000,000 available, more if necessary, full-time job-best man we have, game plan, make economy scream, 48 hours for plan of action.” The next day, Helms told his chief of covert operations, Thomas Karamessines: “The President has asked the Agency to prevent Allende from coming to power or to unseat him.”²⁰

Within forty-eight hours, the Nixon administration devised a two-track strategy to topple Allende. On Track I, ambassador Edward Korry would lobby the Chilean Congress to refuse to ratify Allende’s election and choose a non-socialist alternative. Since that track revolved around the “Frei gambit” of manipulating the congressional vote to extend his term, Frei’s refusal to cooperate quickly ended that option. On Track II, CIA officials were promoting a military coup to overthrow Allende while sending the Agency’s Santiago station \$3 million for an intensive propaganda campaign. On September 9, the head of the CIA’s Chile task force, David Atlee Phillips, cabled his Santiago station with orders “to surface ineluctable conclusion that military coup is the only answer. . . . The key is psych war within Chile. . . . Therefore, the station should employ every stratagem, every ploy, however bizarre, to create this internal resistance.” Consequently, undercover CIA officers started working with General Roberto Viaux, an emotionally unstable right-winger, to plot the abduction of Chile’s army chief, General René Schneider, who was vocally opposed to any military coup.²¹ Finding that this Chilean commander was blocking any possible military action, the Agency was determined to eliminate him, much as Iran’s police chief had been removed in a similar kidnap-assassination plot when he stood in the way of the CIA’s 1953 coup in Tehran.

To push the plotting along, on October 16, Karamessines cabled his station chief in Santiago, Henry Hecksher, saying: “It is firm and continuing policy that Allende be overthrown by a coup. . . . It is imperative that these actions be implemented clandestinely and securely so that the . . . American

hand be well hidden.” To that end, the Santiago station should, said Karamessines, encourage the unstable General Viaux to “join forces” with another plotter, General Camilo Valenzuela.²²

Finding its officers had few of the army contacts needed for this operation, the CIA station chief gave the embassy’s military attaché, Colonel Paul Wimert, twelve automatic weapons called “grease guns,” tear gas, gas masks, and \$250,000 in cash. To assure General Schneider’s elimination, Colonel Wimert, who enjoyed unequaled access to the Chilean military, distributed tear gas grenades, \$50,000 in operational cash, and submachine guns to Chilean officers as if it were “a Christmas party.” On October 22, these coup plotters ambushed General Schneider’s car, smashing its rear window with a sledgehammer and shooting him fatally at close range. Apparently oblivious to the local impact of that shocking death, CIA station chief Hecksher cabled Washington that “the attempt against Schneider is affording armed forces one last opportunity to prevent Allende’s election.” CIA director Helms replied “excellent job.” Both were wrong. As Chilean society recoiled from such an unprecedented act of terror, the country’s elites, including the military, closed ranks to protect the constitutional processes.²³

In Santiago, the CIA station scrambled to conceal any trace of US involvement. When “everybody got scared” after the killing, Colonel Wimert recovered the machine guns, dumped the gas masks in the ocean, and pressed the Chilean officers to return the money. One wanted to keep the cash, so “we had to beat him up pretty good,” said Wimert. “He hit the floor three or four times—his wife came running down her hair in curlers and her robe on, screaming that her husband was sick.”²⁴

Only days after General Schneider’s death, the Chilean Congress voted to approve Allende’s election. On November 3, 1970, Salvador Allende took his oath as president before Congress and drove to La Moneda palace with a military escort, symbolizing the armed forces’ respect for civil authority.²⁵ Despite this setback, the CIA station continued its coup plotting since, as Karamessines later told Congress, “Track II never really ended.”²⁶

A COUP CALLED “TRACK II”

In his memoirs, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger insisted that “there was no American involvement in coup plotting after Allende’s inauguration as president in November of 1970”—a statement that defies the documentary evidence.²⁷

At a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) on November 6, 1970, just three days after Allende’s inauguration, Kissinger advised Nixon that the Chilean president “is a tough, dedicated Marxist,” making it imperative that “we will oppose Allende as strongly as we can . . . to keep him from consolidating power.”²⁸ Seconding that view, Nixon told the NSC: “Our main concern in Chile is the prospect that [Allende] can consolidate himself and the picture projected to the world will be his success. . . . No impression should be permitted in Latin America that they can get away with this, that it’s safe to go this way.” The president then gave specific orders of ways to make the “economy scream,” saying: “On the economic side we want to give him cold turkey. Make sure that EXIM [US Export-Import Bank] and the international organizations toughen up. If Allende can make it with Russian and Chinese help, so be it—but we do not want it to be with our help, either real or apparent.”²⁹

In response to this firm White House policy, Washington launched an economic offensive that cut all US credits and pressed international lenders to curtail investment in Chile, causing a financial crisis that eventually created conditions conducive to a coup.³⁰ As an economy that exported raw commodities and imported most of its finished consumer goods, Chile would prove quite sensitive to that international credit crunch.

During his first months in office, Allende confirmed Washington’s fears when he sent a message to the Chilean Congress calling for a constitutional amendment allowing the immediate nationalization of the country’s copper mines, which passed by a unanimous vote in July 1971. After determining that Anaconda and Kennecott had made \$744 million in excess profits between 1955 and 1970, Allende’s government denied those companies any compensation, with the result, according to the State Department, that “relations between the two countries soured.”³¹

With an ample \$10 million budget approved at a White House meeting on December 10, 1970, the new game plan no longer relied on a few covert gambits but instead deployed the full spectrum of US state power to destabilize Chile’s democracy. In the three years between Nixon’s coup order in September 1970 and the actual coup in September 1973,

Washington created a supportive climate through four distinct efforts. First, it applied economic pressure by cutting off Chile's access to foreign capital, a major blow to its export economy. Next, it translated that economic pain into political pressure by funding visible, vocal protests. Then, media coverage magnified the sense of crisis, creating a political climate conducive to a coup. Finally, contacts with the Chilean military were leveraged to encourage their seizure of power.

In the three years leading to the 1973 coup, the CIA would expend \$3.5 million to support the political opposition, including \$2 million for propaganda largely in *El Mercurio*, Chile's most widely read newspaper, and \$1.5 million for civic and right-wing groups to organize disruptive protests.³² Much of that money was given to moderate groups suffering from the economic disruption of those years, notably housewives who demonstrated by banging empty pots to protest food shortages and truck drivers responsible for crippling roadblocks in 1973. A portion of those funds also went to "militant right-wing groups" responsible for destabilizing Chile. Starting in late 1971, the CIA provided \$38,500 for Patria y Libertad (Fatherland and Liberty), "a self-proclaimed neo-fascist paramilitary group responsible for numerous acts of terrorism." By mid-1973, the CIA's Santiago station reported that Patria y Libertad, along with the newspaper *El Mercurio*, was contributing to the "creation of conflict and confrontation which will lead to some sort of military intervention."³³

As in Iran in the 1950s and South Vietnam in the early 1960s, the CIA's local military assets would prove critical for regime change. Amid the backlash after General Schneider's assassination, the CIA realized the necessity of creating a "predisposition on the part of the military to take initiative themselves," instead of artificially stimulating an ill-planned operation from Washington. The CIA's relentless search for willing officers finally brought them into contact with General Augusto Pinochet, whose command of the army's Santiago garrison was central to the success of any coup attempt. In March 1972, an internal CIA file card indicated that Pinochet was "involved in coup preparations" with the army's chief of staff.³⁴

Despite the Agency's massive propaganda effort, President Allende's leftist coalition actually increased the number of congressional seats it controlled in the March 1973 legislative elections, forcing the CIA station to back "the most militant parts of the opposition," which "have set as their

objective . . . some sort of military intervention.” In July, the CIA reported that coup plans were being delayed by the opposition of the army’s commander in chief, General Carlos Prats, who should therefore be replaced. Amid rising violence and “an intense public smear campaign led by *El Mercurio*,” General Prats resigned on August 23, elevating his deputy, Augusto Pinochet, to command.³⁵ Meanwhile, in the wealthy eastern suburbs of Santiago, ominous graffiti started appearing on walls reading “Jakarta is Coming.”³⁶

During a paralyzing truckers’ strike in August 1973, a report from the US Defense Intelligence Agency confirmed that General Prats’s resignation “has removed the main factor mitigating against a coup.” In early September, representatives from each of the armed services met to approve a coup and named General Pinochet as its commander.³⁷

On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military launched a well-planned, well-executed coup that toppled the democratic government in just seven hours. At 8:00 a.m., the Chilean navy secured the port city of Valparaiso. As the national police swarmed Santiago to secure the capital, Allende managed to escape to the presidential palace and broadcast radio messages calling for workers and students to defend the government. Army tanks then surrounded the palace, while aerial strafing killed several of Allende’s bodyguards. At around 2:00 p.m., Allende shot himself with an assault rifle, a gift from Fidel Castro, and the armed forces radio announced that Chile was now under military control.³⁸

In the days immediately following the coup, international press coverage was uniformly hostile to this overthrow of a legally elected government, prompting Kissinger to complain that if the coup had happened during the Eisenhower years, “we would be heroes.”³⁹

OPERATION CONDOR

During its seventeen years in power, General Pinochet’s autocratic regime moved through two distinct phases—starting with a spectacle of repression marked by torture and murder, followed by a long-term effort to restructure Chile as a capitalist society through economic and constitutional reforms. In the coup’s immediate aftermath, the military arrested sixty thousand supposed leftists and imprisoned many of them in the National Stadium,

torturing thousands and shooting hundreds on its playing field.⁴⁰ The junta opened about twenty interrogation centers nationwide, including the notorious Villa Grimaldi in the city's suburbs.⁴¹ Just a month after the coup, General Pinochet deputized one of his generals, Sergio Arellano Stark, to form a "caravan of death" that would helicopter around the country for two months torturing and executing nearly a hundred political prisoners held on military bases.⁴²

As Pinochet regularized his rule in 1978, the regime passed an amnesty law that guaranteed impunity for all human rights violators, including the general himself, during the preceding five years of harsh repression.⁴³ In the first months following the coup, the ongoing torture and killings were institutionalized by the formation of a new military security unit called DINA (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional), which quickly amassed such absolute power that officials in Washington compared it to a "modern-day Gestapo." Within months, the unit's commander, Colonel Juan Manuel Contreras, had become so lethal that military sources told the US embassy: "There are three sources of power in Chile, Pinochet, God, and DINA." With DINA leading the repression, Pinochet's purge, according to a later government investigation, killed 3,065 people, arrested and tortured 40,018 more, and forced at least 200,000 Chileans (about 2 percent of the population) into exile.⁴⁴

After suppressing much of the Chilean left, the DINA security service led South America's many military dictatorships in launching Operation Condor—a secret campaign to arrest or assassinate suspected communists across the continent that continued almost to the end of the Cold War. In a letter to the chief of Paraguay's police in October 1975 that revealed Chile's central role in forming the Condor network, Colonel Contreras proposed that the apparatus should have a computerized database of suspects "similar to Interpol, but dedicated to Subversion"; a headquarters in Chile with highly secure communications; and "technical personnel" from all participating nations charged, said one analyst, with "disappearances and assassinations." At the operation's inaugural meeting on November 25 at the War Academy in Santiago, the leaders of the seven military intelligence services of the continent's southern tier—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay—launched Condor as a coordinated covert-action operation. All these agencies were concerned about the communities of exiles in Europe and the US whose appeals to human rights were

stigmatizing their military regimes. “Subversion has developed a leadership structure,” Colonel Contreras told the delegates, “that is intercontinental, continental, regional and subregional . . . all of which are given a pleasing face by all kinds of solidarity committees.” To check this threat, Contreras offered a solution. “Chile proposed,” a Uruguayan colonel recalled, “operations to eliminate enemies all over the world, to eliminate people who were causing harm to our countries.”⁴⁵

Through their relations with DINA, US security agencies built the communications infrastructure that was the heart of the Condor network. Not only did the CIA contribute a computer system, then uncommon in Latin America, that was essential for the project’s transnational centralization of data on subversives, but it also provided terminals and encryption devices for a dedicated “Condortel” telex communications grid connecting member countries. In addition, the US military based in the Panama Canal Zone gave the Condor network access to its system of radio transmitters for supplemental communications. Despite DINA’s growing notoriety, the Agency reported that “between 1974 and 1977, CIA maintained contact with Manuel Contreras Sepulveda” largely through its deputy director, General Vernon Walters, who held a meeting with Contreras during his 1975 visit to Washington with the aim of maintaining “good relations with Pinochet.” By then, the CIA was aware that Contreras was running “a formal Southern Cone cooperative intelligence effort —‘Operation Condor’—building on informal cooperation in tracking and, in at least a few cases, killing political opponents.”⁴⁶

According to an archive of seven hundred thousand documents found moldering inside a Paraguayan police station in 1992, during its fifteen-year history Operation Condor was responsible for thirty thousand disappearances, fifty thousand assassinations, and four hundred thousand imprisonments, systematically decimating if not destroying the left in the continent’s Southern Cone. Officially, the main targets were small armed groups like Argentina’s ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo), Chile’s MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria), and Uruguay’s Tupamaros, but in fact included all kinds of political opponents and their families, particularly exiles fleeing from repression in their home countries.⁴⁷

By reaching across borders to eliminate nearly five hundred thousand left-wing activists through assassination and incarceration, Operation

Condor allowed the military dictatorships that governed most of South America during the 1970s to suppress the opposition and sustain their grip on power.

PINOCHET'S MAN ON THE SPOT IN WASHINGTON

For a relatively small developing nation like Chile to create a covert operation with such a strong global reach represented a breach in the clandestine realm of the world order, allowing Pinochet to place his own man on the spot in Washington, DC. Born in Waterloo, Iowa, in 1942, that man, Michael Vernon Townley, moved to Chile in 1957 with his father, a Ford Motor executive. There, the teenager struggled to find an identity and dropped out of high school. "He was," recalled Taylor Branch, the author of a book on Townley's career, "somewhat needy and pathetic, uneducated, but he was a *Popular Mechanics* science whiz. He was constantly trying to impress his girlfriend, who was ten years older." At the age of nineteen, Townley married that girlfriend, Mariana Callejas, a right-wing double divorcée and an aspiring writer. Born in 1932 to a Chilean petit-bourgeois family, Callejas had rebelled against her strict Catholic upbringing; migrated to Israel, where she married her second husband; and in 1960 wound up back in Chile divorced with three children, where she met Townley. The couple later moved to Miami, where she studied writing at the university while he worked as an auto mechanic, learning the electronics he later used to build remote-control bombs and befriending anti-Castro Cubans in Florida's "little Havana." Returning to Chile in 1970, Mariana became a passionate member of the anti-Allende movement, drawing in a reluctant Townley. He was soon operating a pirate radio station that electrified conservative circles in the capital and building hundreds of bombs for her far-right group Patria y Libertad, thereby finding his true calling as a killer. After Pinochet's coup, the couple joined DINA, where Colonel Contreras soon made Townley the organization's top assassin.⁴⁸

As a reward for their services, DINA assigned the couple a three-story mansion in Santiago's elite Lo Curro district that became the site of their bizarre family life. In the basement, agents tortured suspects. On the second floor, Townley had a lab for building bombs and brewing toxins, including a sarin nerve agent that DINA used for at least two murders. On the third

floor, Mariana presided over a literary salon of prominent Chilean writers like Enrique Lafourcade, hosting well-catered readings that helped her win *El Mercurio*'s short-story prize. In 1981, her published collection *La noche larga* (The long night), featured a romanticized portrayal of a fictional assassin, a killer adept in torture and car bombs who was also a poetic soul who reads Walt Whitman.⁴⁹

After the Pinochet regime's spectacle of torture and murder forced two hundred thousand Chilean leftists to flee to 140 countries around the globe, the military junta, said political scientist J. Patrice McSherry, "considered exiles to be dangerous enemies," as they had become "crucial in the development of a global human rights regime." Using the same tactic that had proven so successful at home, Pinochet decided to silence this international opposition through terror. In August 1974, DINA's deputy director described General Carlos Prats, the former army chief who had been critical of Pinochet, as the potential leader of a government in exile and asked Townley to "do something." Regarding this as "a patriotic request," the Townley couple traveled to Buenos Aires, where Michael planted a car bomb and Mariana hit the remote-control detonator, shredding the general and his wife. A year later, Townley met several Italian neofascists in Madrid to arrange the assassination of exiled Christian Democrat leader Bernardo Leighton, an influential Pinochet critic. Both Leighton and his wife were severely injured in a blaze of gunfire near their home in Rome. In July 1976, UN diplomat Carmelo Soria, who had aided the flight of Chilean leftists, was tortured in Townley's basement and beaten to death in the villa's garden.⁵⁰

By 1976, all the agitation of Chilean exiles was starting to have an impact, with the Organization of American States issuing a report critical of Chile's human rights record. During a June visit to Santiago, Secretary of State Kissinger remained fully supportive, telling Pinochet, "You did a great service to the West in overthrowing Allende. My evaluation is that you are a victim of all left-wing groups around the world." When Kissinger urged Pinochet to announce some human rights reforms, the Chilean dictator objected, saying: "But we are constantly being attacked by the [Chilean] Christian Democrats. They have a strong voice in Washington. Not the people in the Pentagon, but they do get through to Congress. [The diplomat Juan] Gabriel Valdez has access." Significantly, the general added: "Also

Letelier,” referring to Orlando Letelier, Allende’s former defense minister and a prominent Pinochet critic.⁵¹

Just three months after that complaint about Letelier, Townley, acting on direct orders from General Pinochet, planted a remote-control bomb in the Chilean exile’s car parked in Embassy Row in Washington, DC. As the blue Chevrolet Chevelle was rounding a traffic circle, a Cuban co-conspirator detonated the bomb, sending metal shards flying sixty feet away and killing both Letelier and his American aide, Ronni Moffitt. Despite the Pinochet regime’s efforts to protect Townley, a painstaking FBI investigation uncovered his role and forced Chile to extradite him to the US, where he plea-bargained his testimony against the six Cuban co-conspirators into a ten-year prison sentence. He was later released into a US witness protection program, where he remains at the time of this writing.⁵²

In 2009, Chilean courts found his ex-wife Mariana Callejas, along with seven other intelligence officers, guilty of murdering General Carlos Prats, for which she served five years under house arrest. In 2015, she was indicted, along with fourteen other DINA agents, for the torture/murder of diplomat Carmelo Soria, but dementia spared her from prosecution. By the time of her death at age eighty-four in 2016, Mariana’s macabre juxtaposition of literature in the living room and torture in the basement had inspired a novel, a stage play, and a feature film. Two years later, Chilean television aired a six-part miniseries, *Mary & Mike*, featuring a dramatic reconstruction of the couple blowing up General Prats.⁵³

Although most assassinations have little lasting impact, Townley’s killings did, in fact, do significant damage to the anti-Pinochet exile movement by eliminating a respected military critic (Prats), an effective interlocutor with Europe’s democratic socialist parties (Leighton), and an intellectual influential among liberals in the US Congress, Latin America, and Europe (Letelier). By terrorizing the exile opposition and decapitating its leadership, Pinochet’s regime was able to proceed with the country’s capitalist transformation unchecked by popular pressure over human rights or social equity.

GENERAL PINOCHET’S REGIME

As his regime moved beyond terror into economic reconstruction, Pinochet was aided by a team of technocrats who had studied with the neo-conservative economist Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago and embraced his free-market gospel. In March 1975, Friedman himself visited Chile and advised the military junta to adopt the “shock treatment” of ending all economic regulation and slashing governmental expenditures. In response, the Pinochet government restricted labor unions, cut wages, and privatized social security.⁵⁴

Although conservatives liked to speak of the “miracle of Chile,” his regime presided over a slow, painful reallocation of resources upward, fostering a marked concentration of private wealth and leaving the poor behind. While the regime cut wages and slashed budgets for education, health, and housing, General Pinochet’s police repressed any attempts at strikes or other forms of protest. Though there was some modest economic improvement in his last years, most of the real growth came during the 1990s after Pinochet had stepped down and center-left reform governments introduced more liberal policies. Adding to his problems, Pinochet lost many of his conservative backers after multiple probes revealed his systemic corruption, including the discovery of millions of dollars in state funds stashed in secret overseas accounts.⁵⁵

Pinochet also promulgated a new constitution in March 1981 that recast Chilean society in a conservative mold and gave him an initial eight-year term, subject to renewal in a national plebiscite. Not only did his charter exclude leftists from the public sphere, but it also granted the military superior status in the polity.⁵⁶

In 1988, ignoring a strong democratic trend ending dictatorships across Latin America, Pinochet held a plebiscite on his presidency, convinced his economic reforms would win him a resounding mandate. To the surprise of conservatives in the US and Europe who idolized his neo-liberal economics, 56 percent of Chileans voted against continuing Pinochet’s presidency, leading to congressional and presidential elections. After losing those contests and stepping down in March 1990, Pinochet continued to serve as commander in chief until March 1998, when he retired and became a senator for life in accordance with his own constitution.⁵⁷

That same year, however, he was arrested while on a trip to London in connection with human rights charges filed by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón. After former prime minister Margaret Thatcher praised Pinochet as

the one “who brought democracy to Chile,” he was eventually released and returned to Santiago in March 2000. Four years later, however, he was stripped of his parliamentary immunity and spent the remainder of his life under house arrest. At his death in December 2006, he was facing three hundred pending criminal charges for human rights violations, tax evasion, and the theft of \$28 million.^{[58](#)}

THE TRAUMATIC PAST

It took Chile many years to bury the remains of that painful past. Despite his political defeat and the official investigations of his regime’s human rights abuses, Pinochet’s political ghost has continued to shape the nation’s destiny through his constitution and amnesty law. In 1991, the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation reported that his dictatorship had been responsible for an estimated 3,400 cases of kidnapping, disappearance, and killing. A subsequent report issued in 2004 found that 38,254 people had been imprisoned and tortured under his regime from 1973 to 1990.^{[59](#)}

But it took Chile’s socialist president, Michelle Bachelet—whose father was tortured to death for opposing the coup and who was herself tortured by General Contreras—to end the forgetting in 2010 by opening a Museum of Memory and establishing a permanent human rights commission. By then, Chile was the one of the few countries in South America that not only investigated human rights violations but also punished some of the perpetrators. By 2012, 799 state agents had been convicted and 1,342 cases were ongoing. At the time of his death in 2015, the former head of Pinochet’s secret police, Manuel Contreras, was serving more than five hundred years in prison for kidnapping, forced disappearances, and assassination.^{[60](#)}

The most iconic case of abuse took many decades to resolve. In 2018, eight retired Chilean army officers were sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for their roles in the murder of folk singer Víctor Jara, a cultural icon in the years of Allende’s Popular Front government. Shortly after the September 1973 coup, Jara was brutally tortured at the Estadio Chile stadium for five days. With the bones in his hands broken, he scrawled his last ballad: “How hard it is to sing when I must sing of horror / Horror which I am living / Horror which I am dying.” Two hours later, the

chief interrogator, Lieutenant Pedro Barrientos, allegedly shot Jara in the head while playing Russian roulette, his troops riddled his body with forty-four bullets, and they dumped the mangled corpse outside a cemetery as a warning. Barrientos later migrated to Florida, where he remained comfortably retired until December 2023, when he was denaturalized and deported to Chile for trial.⁶¹

Despite all the hard-won reforms, Pinochet's legacy would persist in the form of his conservative constitution. Beneath all the drama evoked by "communism versus conservatism," the driving issue in Chilean politics for nearly a century was the struggle between the mass of workers and a wealthy bourgeoisie. To ensure elite dominance, Pinochet's 1980 constitution created "binomial" parliamentary districts that gave conservatives 50 percent of the seats with only 35 percent of the vote, thereby blocking any constitutional amendments or economic reforms that might ameliorate the country's glaring social inequality.⁶²

In 2020, amid a surge of popular protests, 78 percent of the electorate voted in a plebiscite to replace Pinochet's constitution and, a year later, a constitutional convention drafted a new charter. In July 2022, however, voters defeated the proposed charter in a plebiscite, and then rejected a rewritten draft in December 2023, ensuring that General Pinochet's antidemocratic constitution still remains the law of the land.⁶³

THE LEGACY OF TERROR

Although Chile's authoritarian rule has been the subject of much incisive investigation, there is a significant aspect of these events that still merits comment. After twenty years of the Cold War, the CIA had been transformed from an adventurous agency into a bureaucracy of mass death—a change manifest in South Vietnam's Phoenix Program with forty-one thousand killings, the Indonesian army's countercoup with a million murders, and Chile's Operation Condor with 480,000 arrests, tortures, and executions. Compared to his cunning—and at times daring—Cuban, French, and American counterparts, Pinochet's man on the spot Michael Townley was a petty bureaucrat, a bloodless remote-control killer who embraced rightist causes solely "to impress his girlfriend," the morbid

voyeur Mariana Callejas, an omnivore for the vicarious experience needed to feed her fiction.

By appropriating the global Cold War for advantage in a long-running local conflict, General Pinochet and his conservative allies had, with CIA support, stigmatized their political rivals as dangerous subversives and thereby skewed the country's political balance in their favor for a full half-century. Even as late as 2020, more than 50 percent of Chilean children remain "undernourished," labor unions still suffer from the loss of legal protections under Pinochet, and "the average household net-adjusted disposable income per capita is . . . much less than the OECD average" for developed nations—and all this despite the country's fertile lands and lucrative exports.⁶⁴ In both Chile and Indonesia, Washington's intervention fostered right-wing military dictatorships that crushed the left in an orgy of violence and made both countries staunch anti-communist allies of the United States for the balance of the Cold War.

Yet differences in the degree of violence had a lasting impact on the capacity for democratic revival in the Cold War's aftermath. After the mass slaughter of a million people and decades of repression that destroyed Indonesia's labor movement and intellectual life, the country emerged from the Cold War as a hyper-capitalist society with only a limited ability to temper economic inequality with social justice.

In Chile, by contrast, the deaths of just 3,400 activists allowed the political left to reemerge at the close of the Cold War with the election of Socialist Party leader Michelle Bachelet as president in 2006, Bachelet again in 2013, and the leftist Gabriel Boric on a social justice platform in 2021. Providing a clear metric of this difference, in 2024 Freedom House rated Chile as "free" with a score of 94, a respectable rating compared with the lower score of just 83 for the United States and a low 57 ("partly free") for Indonesia.⁶⁵

In contrast to the murky events in Indonesia, which allowed Washington to conceal its role in that country's 1965 counter coup for decades, Congress exposed the Nixon administration's complicity in the Chilean coup quickly—revelations that, in tandem with Washington's support for other Latin American dictators, did lasting damage to its relations with its southern neighbors. And Washington's reputation in the region would be further degraded during the 1980s when the US again intervened in a long-running

social conflict, this time in Central America, where, as we will later learn, it was even more determined to extirpate any sign of socialism.

PART THREE

SURROGATE WARS IN THE THIRD WORLD





Cuban Politburo member Jorge Risquet in Cairo at the talks on southwestern Africa, June 24, 1988, that led to the independence of Namibia and ended the Angolan civil war. (Credit: Mike Nelson / AFP via Getty Images)

CHAPTER 12

THE STRUGGLE FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA

On January 30, 1986, Jonas Savimbi, a bearded Angolan warlord attired in a stylish Nehru jacket, met President Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office, posing for photos that showed the two men chatting warmly before a roaring fire. With publicist Paul Manafort picking Savimbi's clothes and booking his media, the warlord wowed Washington. Indeed, former UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick hailed him as "one of the few authentic heroes of our time." Just four days after that White House tête-à-tête, President Reagan delivered his State of the Union address to Congress, prompting strong bipartisan applause when he affirmed his foreign policy doctrine, saying: "You are not alone, freedom fighters. America will support with moral and material assistance your right not just to fight and die for freedom, but to fight and win freedom—in Afghanistan; Angola; Cambodia; and Nicaragua." Revealing the ambiguity of that commitment to Angola, Savimbi—a warlord notorious for burning his enemies alive and condemned by the Congressional Black Caucus as a "surrogate" for South African apartheid—had become the public face of the "Reagan Doctrine" that would guide US foreign policy in the closing years of the Cold War.¹

By the time American intervention in Angola began in the early 1970s, the Cold War had entered a final phase that would prove extraordinarily violent. Wary of nuclear confrontations as seen in Cuba or conventional conflicts as in Vietnam, Moscow and Washington continued their superpower rivalry by fighting surrogate wars in the impoverished nations of Central America, Central Asia, and southern Africa. By marrying long-standing religious and ethnic tensions to the destructive power of modern weaponry, those regional wars would prove exceptionally brutal, turning whole nations into veritable wastelands.

Viewed from Moscow or Washington, however, such conflicts were remarkably cheap—costing a few million dollars for automatic rifles instead of many billions for nuclear-armed missiles. Since the superpowers were fighting through proxies, they could continue the global diplomatic détente that was reducing the threat of nuclear warfare in those last years of the Cold War.

In addition to such tactical advantages, both superpowers had a mix of economic, ideological, and strategic motivations for backing allies even in the most remote areas of southern Africa. For sheer economic survival, some African nations had kept export ties to the West developed under colonialism—with Angola protecting Gulf Oil, Francophone West Africa exporting commodities to France, Ghana favoring England for its cocoa sales, and both the Congo and Zambia shipping copper to world markets. To counter the West’s economic influence, the Soviet bloc offered African liberation leaders university educations, arms, and military training. Most of sub-Saharan Africa was remote from the Cold War’s geopolitics, but both Ethiopia (thanks to its control over Eritrea) and Somalia used their strategic positions astride the Red Sea’s shipping lanes to court superpower support. Ideologically, Moscow and Havana could oppose European imperialism by sustaining their socialist comrades in the struggle for southern Africa’s liberation. With equal determination, Washington would spend twenty years fighting the spread of communism through a CIA secret war in Angola. Strongly motivated by this mix of ideology, economics, and realpolitik, both superpowers backed their local surrogates with massive arms shipments that would, in the end, inflict unimaginable damage on Africa’s Cold War battlegrounds.

THE CONTEXT FOR CONFLICT

As in Southeast Asia and the Middle East during earlier decades, colonialism and decolonization shaped the contours of Cold War conflict in southern Africa. In the age of “high imperialism” after 1880, European colonial empires had carved up the continent, leaving Africa with only two small independent states—the ex-slave republic of Liberia and the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia. Even after decolonization accelerated in the 1960s, southern Africa still had five million white colonials who would struggle

for the next thirty years to perpetuate their rule over the region's forty-nine million Africans. In Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), a small colony of 220,000 English settlers governed five million Africans. Farther south, four million whites, both English settlers and Dutch descendants called Boers, ruled eighteen million African subjects in South Africa and nearly a million more in a colony called South-West Africa (now Namibia).

Elsewhere in southern Africa, large communities of Portuguese settlers in Angola and Mozambique fought to repress African resistance until the mid-1970s. Even after global decolonization started in the 1940s, impoverished Portugal used Africa as a refuge for its many poor, raising Angola's white population to somewhere between three hundred thousand and five hundred thousand by the 1970s. While those colonials were favored with land and jobs, Angola's six million Africans were subjected to forced labor, arbitrary arrest, and expulsion from their traditional homelands. With booming oil production, vast lands nearly twice the size of Texas, and a seafront capital of 550,000 residents at Luanda, Angola was the great prize in Portugal's African empire.²

Determined to resist decolonization, Portugal's fascist leader, Antonio Salazar, sent troops to fight liberation movements in his three African colonies—Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea (now Guinea-Bissau). Fledgling Angolan liberation movements launched guerrilla warfare in 1961, but they struggled to gain a foothold in the face of Portugal's harsh repression until the early 1970s, when both Beijing and Moscow began providing arms and training. The convergence of the Cold War and those anti-colonial struggles created a geopolitical opening for two extraordinary men on the spot—Cuban revolutionary Jorge Risquet and CIA officer John Stockwell, whose careers culminated in a striking convergence.

RIVAL RESISTANCE GROUPS

By the early 1970s, Angolans had formed three rival resistance groups whose relations with their superpower patrons would sustain a bloody civil war for the next quarter-century. In a complex commingling of ideology and ethnicity, each organization found its mass base among the ethnic groups that divided the country's west coast—the Bakongo in the north near the

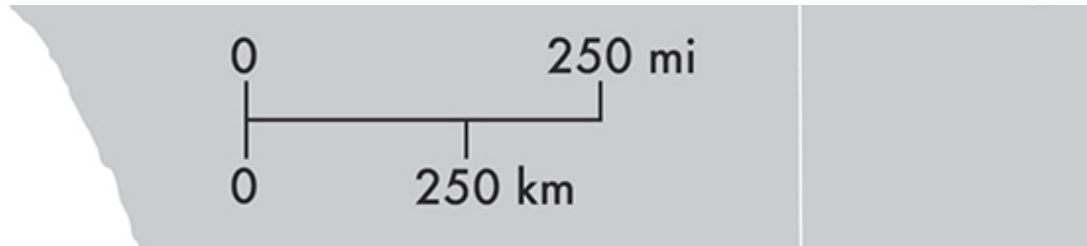
Congolese border, the Mbundu in the center around the capital city of Luanda, and the Ovimbundu in the south-central region.

Formed in 1961 by exiles based in neighboring Congo, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) was the first to rebel against Portuguese rule. Originally organized to gain independence for the Bakongo people, whose former kingdom had once straddled the Congo-Angola border, the FNLA was led by the moderate Holden Roberto, a former accountant in the Belgian Congo and a descendant of prominent Bakongo activists. In the early 1960s, Congo's government gave the FNLA a base at Kinkuzu near the Angolan border, where the group armed its guerrillas with a mix of antiquated World War II weapons and hunting rifles. In March 1961, Roberto's forces attacked farms and settlements along a 400-mile front inside Angola, killing about 750 white settlers. But the Portuguese responded with devastating air attacks, forcing the rebels to retreat to their Congo sanctuary and sending some 150,000 African refugees fleeing the machine-gunning of their villages.³

Washington, needing the Portuguese base in the Azores for transatlantic flights to the Middle East, at first was cautious about supporting Roberto's moderate movement. But by 1963, the US embassy in the Congo had joined that country's leader, Joseph Mobutu, in supporting the FNLA as the sole representative of Angolan nationalists. A year later, Beijing sent some three hundred Chinese instructors to train FNLA forces in Congo, coordinating loosely with the CIA in a joint effort to check Moscow's influence. But in October 1975, the Chinese quit Congo, the first step in a recalibration of their Africa policy, pulling back from liberation movements in Congo, Namibia, and South Africa while increasing their aid to rebels in Mozambique and Zimbabwe.⁴

ANGOLA, MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS





The most resilient of the rebel groups was UNITA, or the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola. It was led by a non-ideological pragmatist, Jonas Savimbi, whose skills as a guerrilla fighter and political negotiator would allow him to survive three decades of cutthroat civil war. After quitting a medical course in Portugal in 1960 and dropping out of a PhD program in Switzerland, Savimbi studied guerrilla warfare in China. Returning to Africa, he became the FNLA's foreign minister, but later quit over the group's focus on a single tribe, the Bakongo, and formed his own rebel army. Unlike rival commanders, he took to the bush where his thundering oratory won him a loyal following among the Ovimbundu people in south-central Angola. By 1974, Savimbi had distinctly shifted to the right to win the backing of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and, after the FNLA faded a year later, to become the sole surrogate for both the CIA and South Africa for the next twenty years.⁵

The other major force in Angola's civil war was the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), a pro-Soviet group led by a Marxist medical doctor, Agostinho Neto. First organized in 1956 among the Mbundu ethnic group, who inhabit central Angola near Luanda, the MPLA included *mestizos* (Angolans of mixed African-Portuguese descent) and many of the African professionals in the capital who were attracted to Marxism. Although CIA briefings dismissed him as "a drunken psychotic poet," Dr. Neto had, in fact, earned his medical degree in Portugal in 1958 and become one of the few non-white doctors in the colony—an achievement which did not spare him, upon his return to Angola, from being flogged in front of his family and thrown into prison, first in Luanda and then in Lisbon. After international protests raised him to the stature of a liberation icon, Dr. Neto escaped to Congo, where he revitalized the MPLA's leadership and fielded some 250 well-trained guerrillas. Although MPLA cadre ultimately proved to be the most effective of Angola's freedom fighters, their Marxism, sympathy for the Soviet Union, and

commitment to freeing southern Africa from white rule would soon make them Washington's blood enemy.⁶

Emboldened by the communist victory in Vietnam, Moscow launched a major political initiative in the 1970s to build socialism in the Third World—shipping arms and advisers to Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Iraq, Somalia, South Yemen, and, above all, Angola. In its first major intervention in Africa, Moscow supported Siad Barre's faux-Marxist regime in Somalia, but soon switched its support to Ethiopia after the military there overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Having cut long-standing ties to Washington, Ethiopia's ruling junta then forged a close Soviet alliance that lasted until the end of the Cold War, granting Moscow military bases and receiving lavish economic aid in return. At the start of that alliance in 1976, Moscow supported Ethiopia in its war against Somalia over the Ogaden region by airlifting in a billion dollars in weapons and twelve thousand Cuban troops. Extending its reach into southern Africa, in March 1975 Moscow started shipping arms to Angola's Marxist MPLA via Tanzania and Congo-Brazzaville.⁷

US INTERVENTION IN ANGOLA

Moscow's intervention in Angola led to a sudden shift in Washington's policy toward southern Africa, from de facto neutrality to covert intervention. Committed to decolonization in principle but tied to European allies resisting that very phenomenon, the US at first backed its NATO partner Portugal, only later to become more supportive of African liberation movements under the liberal Democratic administration of John F. Kennedy.⁸ Shortly after Republican conservative Richard Nixon took office in early 1969, however, his National Security Council under Henry Kissinger stated that "the whites are here to stay" and "there is no hope for the blacks to gain the political rights they seek through violence." The US should, it added, "relax political isolation and economic restrictions on the white states" and "relax the pressure for [African] majority rule." Four years later, Kissinger assured apartheid South Africa's foreign minister that "I will curb any missionary zeal on the part my officers in the State Department to harass you."⁹ For the next quarter-century, US covert intervention in Angola would be driven by that underlying partisan dynamic

—escalating under Republican conservatives and receding under liberal Democrats.

Reacting to reports that the MPLA, a Soviet surrogate, was gaining the upper hand in Angola, Republican president Gerald Ford's White House felt it was facing a serious Cold War challenge. In January 1975, fearing, as Secretary of State Kissinger put it, that the "Russians will be able to ride the momentum of the victory in Angola to . . . total victory in Africa," President Ford, Kissinger, and the 40 Committee, which controlled covert operations, agreed that the CIA would supply Holden Roberto's moderate FNLA guerrillas with \$300,000 and Jonas Savimbi's anti-communist UNITA fighters with \$100,000—not enough to win, but enough to punish the Marxist MPLA by raising the cost of their ascent to power. But once the communists took the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon that April, delivering a heavy blow to US prestige, Kissinger decided to hit back much harder in Angola. In July 1975, therefore, President Ford authorized a hundred-fold funding increase to \$32 million for the CIA's Operation IAFeature, which would soon field eighty-three Agency officers to distribute 25 tons of surplus weaponry—including 360 machine guns, 470 mortars, 4,200 anti-tank rockets, and 20,000 rifles. A parallel increase in Soviet arms shipments heightened the Cold War rivalry over southern Africa and sparked a protracted civil war among rival rebel factions in Angola.¹⁰

To lead the operation, the CIA plucked a senior officer, John R. Stockwell, from semi-retirement and sent him to Africa, where he soon became the most complex and contradictory of Washington's many men on the spot. Born in 1937 in Texas, Stockwell grew up in the Belgian Congo, where his parents were Presbyterian missionaries and he became fluent in the local Tshiluba language. Like that other missionary son Bill Young in Laos, Stockwell was a natural asset for the CIA—yet one with loyalties divided between the locals he liked and the country he served. Despite his doubts about Kissinger's punitive strategy, Stockwell made a flying reconnaissance of Angola's battlegrounds in August 1975, drawing upon his knowledge of Central Africa to frame a coherent strategy for the CIA's Operation IAFeature. Joining the FNLA troops in northern Angola during their drive for Luanda, he observed that their commander, Holden Roberto, though inept, still insisted on making all the decisions. Flying on into central Angola, Stockwell found UNITA chief Savimbi a charismatic speaker and

skilled fighter, though his openness to white South African aid threatened his stature as a “black nationalist.” Finding that the Marxist MPLA’s poor discipline created an opportunity for “total victory,” Stockwell recommended arming Washington’s surrogates, the FNLA and UNITA. By early October, the CIA’s ad hoc fleet of nine aircraft was shuttling shipments of arms and ammunition from Congo into Angola to both forces.¹¹

Through its sub-rosa alliance with the US, the apartheid regime in South Africa quickly expanded its involvement in Angola, starting in October 1974 with limited shipments of arms to Savimbi’s UNITA rebels. Not only was Pretoria determined to defend apartheid at home, but it was also trying hold on to its large colony in Namibia by fighting the local SWAPO guerrillas who were based in neighboring Angola. Within months, Pretoria’s intelligence service, BOSS (Bureau of State Security), formed an arm’s-length alliance with the CIA, sharing information and arms shipments into Angola.¹²

As that surrogate war escalated in mid-1975, Moscow asked Fidel Castro to use his close ties to Congo-Brazzaville to facilitate Soviet arms airlifts for Angola. By August, Castro had 250 Cuban military trainers in Angola and was urging Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to send advisers of his own. But Moscow did not want to spoil its détente with Washington and delayed any open involvement until Angola achieved independence that November. Indeed, Castro’s ideological commitment to aiding “all national liberation movements” would keep Cuban forces fighting in Angola for the next thirteen years, while Moscow’s more calculated geopolitical approach would produce a variable level of support.¹³

To manage joint military operations with Moscow, Havana dispatched Jorge Risquet, a senior member of the Cuban Communist Party who, a decade earlier, had formed a friendship with MPLA leader Dr. Neto while serving as the chief Cuban adviser training his fighters in Congo-Brazzaville. As Angola spiraled into civil war, Risquet would work for four years as a man on the spot unlike any other. He was a revolutionary apparatchik, not an imperial adventurer. As an emissary from a small state, not the secret agent of a superpower, he was forced to navigate the geopolitical interstices between empires, deploying his troops cautiously for strategic advantage. Covert operatives from the major powers often found amorality their greatest asset. For Risquet, however, ideological

commitment was his tactical touchstone, whether arguing with Soviet allies or negotiating with American enemies.¹⁴

Born in a Havana slum in 1930 to semiliterate Afro-Cuban tobacco workers who were communist sympathizers, Risquet never got further than elementary school. After joining the Communist Party at age thirteen, he was tortured by dictator Batista's secret police, fought alongside Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra mountains, and went on to hold senior party positions. When Castro decided to aid the liberation of Africa, Risquet led the Cuban military mission to Congo-Brazzaville in 1965 and then, starting in 1975, became "Castro's point man for Angola."¹⁵

Through this alignment of the superpowers and their surrogates, Angola's civil war would continue for a full quarter-century through four distinct phases that would lay waste to much of the country and leave a legacy of grinding poverty.

PHASE ONE: THE START OF SURROGATE WARFARE

In the struggle's initial phase from 1974 to 1980, Angola plunged into a maelstrom of armed conflict, forging some basic political parameters that would define the war until its very end twenty years later. During the late 1960s, the Portuguese, seeing the MPLA guerrillas as their biggest threat, tried to check their advance through an intense pacification program using napalm and defoliants. In 1974, however, radical officers toppled Portugal's fascist regime in a coup called the "Carnation Revolution," and then set Angola's independence for November 1975, heightening tensions between the rival guerrilla groups there.

With its control over the capital city and eleven out of Angola's fifteen provinces, the Marxist MPLA developed an entente with the Portuguese authorities and seemed set to form a government. To prepare Angola for independence, Portugal concluded the Alvor Agreement in January 1975, trying to organize a peaceful transfer of power. Convinced, however, that the agreement would indeed put the leftist MPLA in power, Secretary of State Kissinger and the CIA decided to encourage the FNLA's Holden Roberto to capture the capital by force of arms. To that end, Washington raised its covert funding from \$300,000 that January to \$32 million in September.¹⁶

Aided by arms from the CIA and South Africa, in July 1975 FNLA forces pushed south from their base in Congo toward Luanda. Backed by a thousand Congolese soldiers and CIA-funded white mercenaries, the FNLA first expelled the Marxist MPLA from much of northern Angola. Then, in mid-October, the South African Defense Force joined the anti-communist FNLA and UNITA guerrillas in an aggressive north-south pincer attack to capture the capital before the Portuguese could transfer power to the Marxist MPLA at independence, set for November 11, 1975. Under the pressure of the pincer attack, the MPLA's territorial control collapsed to just three provinces. The capital city trembled at the brink of capture. The US closed its consulate. The local CIA station cabled Washington that the Marxists would soon be defeated. Fears of getting caught in a cross fire between rival guerrilla factions sparked a pell-mell exodus of the three hundred thousand remaining Portuguese colonists, emptying the country of whites by the time independence came. African diplomats did not dare to attend the ceremony.¹⁷

But on November 5, 1975, Moscow started airlifting an estimated \$300 million in arms to its MPLA allies. Without waiting for the Soviet support to reach a critical mass, Havana flew some 650 Cuban special forces to Luanda, while a Cuban artillery regiment and another four thousand soldiers followed in three converted cruise ships. By November 10, just a day before the country's formal independence, Holden Roberto's joint FNLA-Congo force—backed by South African artillery, 120 Portuguese mercenaries, and some CIA advisers—had fought their way to Quifangondo, just fifteen miles from Luanda. With the city almost in their grasp, the guerrillas surged across an open plain without advance scouts. Suddenly, there was a thundering roar as Cuban troops fired salvos of 122-mm rockets from mobile Soviet launchers called “Stalin's organs.” As two thousand rounds came crashing down, each shell scattering “fourteen thousand red-hot, razor sharp slivers of steel,” the FNLA forces were slaughtered in what came to be known all too appropriately as the Battle of Death Road, not only halting their advance but breaking their morale. Crushed, the surviving fighters fled northward toward the Congo border raping and pillaging as they went, effectively eliminating themselves as a contender for power in Angola.¹⁸

Simultaneously, a South African column of 2,500 white Boer soldiers had crossed the southern border from Pretoria's Namibia colony into

Angola in Eland armored cars, serving as the vanguard for several thousand of Savimbi's UNITA guerrillas. Led by a skilled commander, Commandant Jan Dirk Breytenbach, South Africa's Operation Savannah fought over sixty engagements in just thirty-three days, as the armored column swept north for six hundred miles toward the capital, killing 210 MPLA fighters at a cost of only five South African dead.¹⁹

But on November 23, at a river crossing near the town of Ebo, just 250 miles south of Luanda, a detachment of seventy Cuban special forces defenders blasted the South African armored column with rockets and rocket-propelled grenades—destroying eight Eland armored cars, killing eighty UNITA guerrillas, and sending the South Africans on a pell-mell retreat. Significantly, that engagement showed, as one South African soldier put it, that “the Boers could be beaten on the battlefield.” While Soviet arms and Cuban troops continued to arrive in Angola, South African prime minister John Vorster pulled his troops back toward the border and, in March 1976, decided to withdraw from Angola.²⁰

In a last-ditch effort to stem the receding tide, CIA deputy director Vernon Walters spent nearly a million dollars to recruit several hundred Portuguese, French, and British mercenaries. But by the time they arrived in northern Angola in January 1976, the FNLA's incompetent field commander, a murderous British mercenary, was already leading them into oblivion, and those sent to aid UNITA soon quit.²¹

While Washington was retreating, Moscow was advancing. Between November 1975 and January 1976, Soviet air transports delivered massive shipments of heavy arms—including SAM-7 missiles, artillery, mortars, rocket launchers, modern tanks, and several MiG-21 jet fighters. In the same period, the Soviets transported an additional twelve thousand Cuban troops to Angola, bringing their total to thirty-six thousand. With those arms and allies, the MPLA pushed the remnants of Roberto's FNLA forces back to Congo and drove the UNITA fighters out of the southern city of Huambo, forcing them even farther south. By March 1976, therefore, the MPLA had gained the three key components for its eventual victory in the quarter-century of civil war that followed—the capital city of Luanda, the country's oil-rich Cabinda enclave, and a military capacity to defend its territory.²²

The US defeat on the ground in Angola was compounded by a rapid succession of political and diplomatic reverses. As the routed South

Africans withdrew, the UNITA guerrillas also faded into the southern borderlands. Meanwhile, the news of Pretoria's intervention prompted Nigeria to recognize the MPLA and provide \$120 million in aid from its swelling oil revenues.²³

Determined to recoup Washington's prestige lost in the fall of Saigon, Kissinger wanted to punish the new MPLA government by continuing covert aid to his favored guerrillas. But Congress, mindful of the recent defeat in Vietnam, was concerned by the rapid escalation of the CIA's involvement in Angola. Within weeks of the MPLA's victories, overwhelming majorities in both the House and Senate passed the Clark Amendment, which cut off covert aid to Angola for another decade.²⁴

To close out its Operation IAFEATURE, the CIA paid off its mercenaries, made severance payments to FNLA and UNITA, and issued medals to its officers. Moscow's victories in Angola and Vietnam affirmed its alliance with Third World socialism, but did so at the cost of détente with Washington.²⁵ As the US prepared to stop further Soviet gains along an "arc of crisis" from East Africa to Central Asia, these events would prime Washington for Cold War collisions during the 1980s in Afghanistan, Angola, and Central America. It would not be an overstatement to say that the final, destructive period of the global Cold War from 1975 to 1991 started in these battles at Quifangondo and Ebo in Angola.

Complicating the CIA's future involvement in Angola, in April 1977 the head of its Operation IAFEATURE, John Stockwell, went public with his criticisms of the Agency's covert action in that country. After six years as CIA chief in Katanga and Burundi, he had been assigned to South Vietnam's strategic Tay Ninh Province in 1973, where his doubts about the Agency began to grow. When he reported that the local police chief "liked to carve people up with knives in the CIA safe house," his superiors defended the man as a useful asset. Just days before Saigon's fall in 1975, Stockwell rushed to the city with critical intelligence about an impending attack. But he had to do the briefing in a bar over lunch while his CIA supervisor enjoyed an appetizer of oral sex—an experience that revealed, Stockwell said, "the cynicism, the moral corruption" of the Agency.²⁶

During his Angola assignment to meet rebel leader Savimbi, Stockwell had an unsettling epiphany that ended his CIA career. Standing on a railroad track in the Angolan bush, he imagined being able to see a thousand miles across Africa, from the coast's "crystal waters" to the continent's dusty

interior. Inspired by the contrast between Africa's timeless majesty and the CIA's "empty cynicism," Stockwell soon became the foremost American critic of covert operations. In a resignation letter published in the *Washington Post* in April 1977, he condemned the CIA's involvement in Angola as "irresponsible and ill-conceived, . . . contributing substantially to the escalation of an already bloody civil war," which was leaving "the United States . . . solidly discredited . . . having allied itself with South Africa, and having lost."²⁷

After his resignation, Stockwell testified for five days before the Senate Intelligence Committee, explaining to senators "how they had been manipulated by the CIA during the Angola War." After publishing a best-selling exposé of the Angolan operation, he appeared before the committee again in 1980, charging that the Agency's covert operations "ranged from the felonious, to violent, to depraved," and condemning the CIA's Angola task force as responsible for "a secret war in which 10,000 lives were lost." Worldwide, he added, CIA covert operations had killed some three hundred thousand people. Its activities, he argued, should be limited to fighting Moscow, and "not in every one of the little African countries where there are no secrets to be gathered." In response, several Republican senators expressed "disgust" at his testimony, calling him "asinine," "ridiculous," and "disloyal to this country."²⁸

To confiscate the royalties from his best-selling memoir about the Angola intervention, the CIA sued Stockwell in federal court. But he argued that the cost of research had left him "broke" and his eventual bankruptcy filing rendered the case moot.²⁹ Undeterred, Stockwell, handsome and articulate, spent the Cold War's closing decade critiquing "CIA-sponsored terrorism" to enthusiastic student audiences on college campuses from Boston to San Diego, trying unsuccessfully to stoke popular pressure for reform of the Agency's covert operations.³⁰

PHASE TWO: THE ROAD TO CUITO CUANAVALÉ (1977–88)

In the late 1970s, Angola's civil war slowly entered a second phase as local actors—South Africa, Namibia's SWAPO guerrillas, UNITA, and even the Congolese government—kept regional conflicts bubbling on a low boil that

ultimately frustrated President Jimmy Carter's attempt at a diplomatic resolution. Once President Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, renewed superpower intervention would bring such regional disputes to a dramatic and extraordinarily violent resolution. As a long-standing critic of the détente policy that had led to nuclear disarmament negotiations under previous administrations, Reagan was determined to renew the rivalry with the Soviets.³¹

While Washington was still recoiling from the CIA's defeat in Vietnam and debating its failed involvement in Angola, South African prime minister P. W. Botha, a militant Boer nationalist known as "the big crocodile," mounted an aggressive defense of his party's apartheid rule—developing nuclear weapons, requiring conscription for all white males, and ordering offensives against African liberation movements. That policy included increasing South Africa's support for Savimbi's UNITA rebels in southern Angola by sending instructors and weapons to his forces.³²

Above all, President Reagan's aggressive anti-communism, with its commitment to assisting anti-communist "freedom fighters" globally, would spark a renewed Cold War crisis in Angola, prompting the CIA, Cuba, South Africa, and the Soviet Union to expand their involvement there.³³ As the White House formed an arm's-length alliance with Pretoria to fight the MPLA's Marxist government, South Africa launched repeated incursions into Angola. Meanwhile, Cuba responded by increasing its forces there to forty thousand by 1985, and the Soviets airlifted in \$2 billion in military aid. As battles raged across Angola for nearly five years, the Cold War came back to southern Africa with a vengeance.

In December 1983, South Africa launched Operation Askari, sending several armored columns into southern Angola aimed at destroying the SWAPO guerrillas who were fighting to free neighboring Namibia from Pretoria's colonial rule. Although the operation was unsuccessful, the South African incursions inflicted heavy casualties on the Angolan army and raised tensions over strategy between its Soviet and Cuban advisers. During a meeting in Luanda with the Red Army's chief adviser, General Valentin Varennikov, Cuban man on the spot Jorge Risquet spoke in ways that revealed how he managed relations with the Soviets. "You can be absolutely certain, dear comrade General," he said, "that if the South Africans attack the line that we are defending, we will fight fiercely, . . . but know with equal certainty that we will refuse to endanger even a single

Cuban life in an operation we consider ill-advised, wrong-headed and unrealistic.”³⁴

The convergence between the formal announcement of the Reagan Doctrine in February 1985 (which committed the US to supporting anti-communist “freedom fighters”) and Congress’s repeal of the Clark Amendment in July (which had banned any covert involvement in Angola) allowed Washington to increase its support for Savimbi’s UNITA forces to \$50 million. As Reagan told his advisers: “We want Savimbi to know the cavalry is coming.” With some momentary success on the battlefield, Savimbi became the living embodiment of the Reagan Doctrine, the star in his administration’s global constellation of freedom fighters. Supported by Washington’s conservative Heritage Foundation, Savimbi’s headquarters at Jamba in southern Angola played host to an anti-communist conference called the Democratic International, attracting several members of the European Parliament and American conservatives Oliver North and Jack Abramoff. In January 1986, moreover, President Reagan hosted Savimbi at the White House, speaking expansively of UNITA winning “a victory that electrifies the world,” and subsequently supplying Savimbi’s forces with a hundred TOW anti-tank missiles and three hundred Stinger missiles to shoot down Angola’s MiG fighters.³⁵ Encouraged by Reagan’s increased aid for Savimbi, Prime Minister Botha expanded South Africa’s armed intervention in Angola, hoping to shatter that country and thus secure Namibia as a de facto colony.³⁶

Over strenuous Cuban objections, the Angolan army, acting on Soviet advice, attacked UNITA forces in August 1985 at the southern Angolan town of Mavinga. But South African aircraft and artillery hit back hard, inflicting heavy casualties. Seeking arms to match the South Africans, Jorge Risquet led a Cuban delegation to Moscow in January 1986, arguing that “our great weakness is that South Africa has air superiority over southern Angola. We must eliminate this.” Even though Moscow refused to supply such air defenses, Soviet advisers in Angola urged another attack. When the Angolan army again advanced on Mavinga in September 1987, the South Africans not only repelled the attack but counterattacked, forcing the Angolan forces to retreat 180 miles north toward the town of Cuito Cuanavale. Determined to deliver a knockout blow, the South Africans and Savimbi’s UNITA guerrillas mounted a sustained effort to break through the

Angolan defenses there and destroy their army—setting the stage for a world-historical battle that raged for the next six months.³⁷

Between October 1987 and March 1988, the siege of Cuito Cuanavale, a small municipality near a river crossing in southern Angola, became the turning point in the Angolan civil war. Although the Soviets were discouraged by the Angolan army's recent reverses, Fidel Castro, determined to drive the Boers out of Angola, began sending fifteen thousand of his best troops there in January 1988, raising the Cuban strength to fifty-five thousand soldiers, well armed by a recent surge in Soviet shipments that included MiG-23 fighters and mobile air defense systems. By then, moreover, ten years of Cuban training had transformed the Angolans, in the view of one US military analyst, from a "shabby guerrilla force into a relatively proficient army." Starting in early 1988, six thousand white South African troops, backed by sixty-five thousand UNITA guerrillas, launched six bloody attacks on that river crossing defended by eighteen thousand Angolan and three thousand Cuban troops who were supported by a "sophisticated" Soviet air defense system and MiG fighters that neutralized the South African Mirage jets. On March 23, the South Africans launched their last major attack, which was, said one of their officers, "brought to a grinding and definitive halt" by the Angolan-Cuban defenders. At a cost of 4,700 Angolan and 86 Cuban dead, plus 150 armored vehicles destroyed and 12 MiG jets downed, the Angolan-Cuban forces had held on through the long months of intense combat, ultimately forcing the South African troops to retreat in defeat.³⁸

After stopping the last of the South African attacks in March, Angolan and Cuban jet fighters, protected by Soviet SAM missiles that kept the Boer jets at bay, achieved the kind of air superiority over southern Angola that allowed the Cubans to launch an offensive. With twelve thousand Cuban troops and two hundred tanks deployed in southern Angola, three armored detachments pushed south toward the border, forcing the South Africans to withdraw into Namibia. Within a month, Pretoria's diplomats met the Angolans and Cubans in the Cape Verde Islands off the coast of West Africa, where the Boers agreed in principle to withdraw from Angola in exchange for a cease-fire.³⁹

Although the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale remained a bloody stalemate for six months, the Angolans and Cubans ultimately secured a victory, which had multiple consequences for Africa. First and fundamentally, South

Africa's elite white soldiers were forced to retreat from a major battle against African troops—a historic first that shook Pretoria's confidence. After Prime Minister Botha was forced to call up the reserves in early 1988 and the number of Boer deaths soared, South Africa was clearly losing its ability to defeat African liberation movements. Just as the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 arguably represented the greatest European defeat in four centuries of imperialism, so the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988 sounded the death knell for a century of colonial rule in Africa.

PHASE THREE: THE BEGINNING OF THE END (1988–91)

While the fighting raged through 1988, Washington presided over protracted negotiations between Angola, Cuba, and South Africa that culminated at year's end in the signing of the New York Accord—not ending the Angolan civil war but simply marking the start of its penultimate phase. From January 1988 onward, the Cuban delegation was led by Jorge Risquet, who proved as wily at the conference table as he had been on the battlefield. At the Cairo round in these protracted negotiations, Pretoria proposed joint troop withdrawals, a coalition between Savimbi and the Marxist government, and a delay in any discussion of Namibia's independence. Risquet's reply was withering. "The era of your military adventures, of your . . . crimes against the people of Angola, this era has ended," he said. "The South Africans must understand that they will not win at this table what they have failed to win on the battlefield."⁴⁰

During these long months of talks, US assistant secretary of state Chester Crocker, a committed anti-communist, was reluctantly impressed with Risquet. "Reading the Cubans is yet another art form," he remarked. "We witness considerable tactical finesse and genuinely creative moves at the [negotiating] table." When Crocker pressed for a commitment that the ongoing Cuban advance in southern Angola would stop at the Namibian border, Risquet replied: "The only way to guarantee [that] is to reach an agreement" on Namibia's independence.⁴¹ Thanks at least in part to Risquet's deft maneuvers, the accord's final text provided that South Africa would indeed withdraw from Angola, end its support for UNITA's guerrillas, and free Namibia. In exchange for all that, Risquet agreed only to

withdrawing Cuba's fifty thousand troops from Angola within two years—something the Cubans planned to do anyway. Although US officials attributed the accord to the “elegance” of Crocker's negotiating strategy, that diplomat, with his doctorate from Johns Hopkins, was outmaneuvered at the bargaining table by a Cuban communist with a fourth-grade education. In June 1989, Angola's civil war ended in a truce and, nine months later, the new nation of Namibia was freed from colonial rule.⁴²

Faced with such clear signs of waning white power, South Africa's apartheid regime began to crumble. After decades of tacit support for Pretoria by London and Washington, the global anti-apartheid movement finally turned world public opinion against white-minority rule. In the mid-1980s, marches protesting the British government's support for apartheid swelled into some of the largest in the country's history, while demands for divestment from South Africa on campuses across America cut US investment in the country by half. In September 1988, the anti-apartheid campaign hosted a star-studded pop concert at London's Wembley Stadium that was watched by a global audience of six hundred million television viewers, sending the cry “Free Nelson Mandela” ringing round the world. Within a matter of months, Pretoria did just that. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989, a more moderate Boer government, realizing that its Western support was evaporating, released Mandela from prison, where the African National Congress leader had been held for twenty-seven years. Responding to the willingness of both Mandela's party and Namibia's SWAPO to compromise as Soviet aid faded, Pretoria, instead of fighting to the bitter end like the French *pieds-noirs* in Algeria, negotiated a transition to African-majority rule that protected both white-owned farms and major corporations.⁴³

In his first overseas trip after being freed from prison, Mandela addressed a massive crowd in Havana with Fidel Castro at his side. “The decisive defeat of the racist army in Cuito Cuanavale,” Mandela said, “was a victory for all Africa. . . . The decisive defeat of the aggressive apartheid forces destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressor. The defeat of the apartheid army served as an inspiration to the struggling people of South Africa.”⁴⁴ In that country's first free elections in 1994, Mandela won the presidency by a convincing margin—effectively ending white-minority rule in South Africa and thereby completing the global process of decolonization.

PHASE FOUR: THE FINAL DECADE OF CIVIL WAR (1991–2002)

Despite its involvement in the peace process, Washington alone among the signatories to the New York Accord would continue its covert intervention in Angola—sending sufficient funding to spark more fighting during a final decade of civil warfare. In January 1989, President-elect George H. W. Bush wrote Savimbi hailing his “courageous demonstration.” With publicist Paul Manafort lobbying hard on his behalf, US aid for Savimbi doubled to \$80 million, allowing the UNITA chief to launch another campaign to capture the capital.⁴⁵

In his continuing bid for power, Savimbi lurched between negotiations and armed struggle. Only a month after he lost the 1992 presidential elections to the MPLA’s José Eduardo dos Santos, some seven thousand of his UNITA guerrillas surrounded Luanda, forcing the government into another round of inconclusive peace talks. Within a year, however, President Bill Clinton recognized the Marxist MPLA government and issued an Executive Order that banned the supply of “arms and related material of all types” to UNITA, effectively ending CIA covert intervention in Angola. With his usual agility, however, Savimbi took control of the diamond-rich provinces in the country’s north and, for the next five years, sustained his guerrillas with the sale of “blood diamonds.” Although peace negotiations in 1994 produced an offer to make him vice president, Savimbi remained in the bush and resumed offensive operations in 1998—fighting until he fell to a fusillade of fifteen bullets in February 2002. To quell rumors of his immortality, the government showed photos of his bloodied body on national television, ending the civil war after twenty-seven years of ceaseless, costly conflict.⁴⁶

THE COSTS OF THE COLD WAR

The Cold War in Africa inflicted lasting damage on almost everyone involved—superpower rivals, local actors, and the people of Africa themselves. Locked in a struggle for global hegemony, Moscow and Washington sought pliable surrogates there, turning southern Africa into a bloody Cold War battleground. To get the foreign aid they so desperately needed to recover from a century of colonial rule, the continent’s emerging

nations had little choice but to court the great powers and play their given parts as ideological allies. The convergence of decolonization and superpower rivalry thus drew Africa's emerging nations into a global war as surrogates who would pay a high price for that aid in the form of rising civil conflict and declining economic development.

Like Afghanistan and Central America, Africa would suffer lasting consequences from its role as a Cold War battleground. On balance, Washington's two decades of covert intervention in Angola had tragic repercussions for that society, leaving a ravaged, ruined land by the Cold War's close. Instead of that conflict ending quickly once the combatants had exhausted their limited local resources, Washington sent sufficient aid to sustain twenty years of civil warfare that would kill eight hundred thousand people and displace four million more in a population of only eight million. Moreover, the rival factions sowed the countryside with fifteen million land mines that, as of 2014, had disabled an estimated eighty-eight thousand victims, filling city streets and rural villages with the walking wounded.⁴⁷ Worse yet, thanks in part to miserable health care facilities, Angola's average life expectancy would be an abysmal forty-seven years at the close of the civil war in 2002.⁴⁸

Although founded as a liberation movement, the Marxist MPLA would devolve into a corrupt patronage machine during Eduardo dos Santos's thirty-eight-year rule (1979–2017), allowing him to distribute oil profits to his cronies and lucrative positions to his children. By 2016, his daughter Isabel had become chair of Sonangol, the Angolan state oil monopoly, and was the richest woman in Africa with \$2 billion in stolen assets. Not only did that plunder lead to her indictment on fraud charges in 2020, being barred from the US for "significant corruption" in 2021, and being sanctioned by the British government as a "notorious kleptocrat" in 2024, but it arguably kept an estimated 53 percent of the country's population living in extreme poverty.⁴⁹

The other Portuguese colony in southern Africa, Mozambique, escaped CIA intervention, but its passage to freedom was only somewhat less painful. When Portugal granted Mozambique independence in 1975, its local liberation group, FRELIMO, collectivized land holdings and confiscated businesses, which caused a mass flight of Portuguese residents, quickly cutting their population from 250,000 to an estimated 15,000. Their flight was accelerated by an order from the new socialist government that

gave many whites twenty-four hours to leave the country with no more than twenty kilograms of luggage.⁵⁰ Within a year, however, neighboring white-settler regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa had sponsored the formation of the ruthless Renamo rebel group, which roiled the countryside for another fifteen years. By the time that the Cold War's close allowed a peace settlement, a million people had died, thousands of schools and clinics had been destroyed, and 4.5 million in a population of 13 million had been forced to flee their homes.⁵¹

Elsewhere in Africa, Washington's close Cold War alliance with the Congo contributed to the making of a failed state. After CIA operations blocked Soviet intervention there, Washington's thirty-year alliance with President Joseph Mobutu's kleptocracy allowed US companies access to the country's minerals, but it also impeded the formation of a capable government and helped catalyze a Second Congo War that would kill five million people.⁵²

Despite the sharp contrast in ideology between Angola's Marxist regime and Congo's military dictatorship, there was, over the longer term, a strong underlying similarity. By staffing state resource corporations with kin and cronies, Angola's Eduardo dos Santos and Congo's Joseph Mobutu engaged in systemic plunder that, by the end of their long years in power, left most of their populations living in poverty on just \$6.00 a day circa 2020—73 percent for Angola and 97 percent for Congo.⁵³ How could two very different regimes both perform the political alchemy of turning wealth into poverty? Their shared experience as Cold War battlegrounds seems the likely cause. In the context of that global conflict, foreign patrons, Moscow and Washington, provided these two autocratic regimes with massive aid, military force, and an external legitimization that overrode any domestic oversight, allowing both governments to sink into a cesspit of corruption.

Moscow may have scored a moral victory by backing the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and the MPLA government in Angola, but its alliance with Ethiopia would prove a disaster beyond anything the US did in Angola or Congo. For fifteen years, the Soviets supported Ethiopia's radical military regime, the Derg, in a failed effort to build a socialist state on feudal foundations. By 1990, billions in military aid and thousands of Soviet advisers had made that country Moscow's greatest foreign-aid effort since China back in the 1950s. Much of that military aid would be wasted in Ethiopia's bloody regional wars—the first, a hard-won victory in 1977–78

over Somalia in a dispute over the arid Ogaden region, and then, a decade later, a losing struggle against guerrillas in its own Tigray and Eritrea provinces. Even worse, Soviet advisers supported the regime's socialist experiments in collective farming and state-owned forests, precipitating an ecological crisis that led to one of the world's worst famines, with an estimated 1.2 million deaths between 1983 and 1985. At the end of the Cold War in 1991, the Tigray and Eritrean guerrilla movements toppled the Derg and drove its dictator, Moscow ally Mengistu Haile Mariam, into exile in Zimbabwe.⁵⁴

In areas where the Cubans served as intermediaries, Soviet military aid was sometimes more effective. Apart from Che Guevara's dismal mission to eastern Congo in the mid-1960s, the Cubans generally proved skilled at deploying Soviet weaponry in Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Ethiopia, and, above all, Guinea-Bissau. Although a small country of only five hundred thousand people squeezed between Guinea and Senegal, the Portuguese colony of Guinea-Bissau became the site of a relentless fifteen-year war between the Portuguese military, commanded by the aristocratic General António de Spínola, and the Partido Africano da Independência, led by the most skilled of Africa's liberation leaders, Amílcar Cabral. Starting in 1967, a contingent of sixty Cuban advisers, mainly artillerymen, aided eight thousand local guerrillas in liberating the bulk of the county by the time the Portuguese granted independence in 1974.⁵⁵

While Moscow and Washington treated Africa as a Cold War battleground and flooded the continent with arms, Beijing was focused on working with liberation governments to build the two-thousand-mile TanZam railway that carried Zambia's copper exports north to Tanzania instead of southeast through racist Rhodesia—the first of many strategic aid projects that would eventually make China the dominant foreign power in Africa. In 2002, when Angola sought aid to repair the damage from its long civil war, Beijing gave generously. But Washington still refused to make amends. Over the next twenty years, China's share of Africa's exports would soar to 20 percent, making it the continent's largest trading partner—controlling much of its rare earth minerals needed for alternative energy and installing 5G internet networks to “power Africa's digital future.” Meanwhile, the US share of the continent's exports would tumble to just 5 percent—an oversight the Biden administration belatedly tried to correct by rebuilding Angola's rail corridor.⁵⁶

By the time CIA covert intervention in Angola ended in 1993, Washington had won the Cold War but had lost a continent—Africa, home to nearly one-fifth of all humanity. Meanwhile, China's growing challenge to American global hegemony was beginning to raise questions about the strategic wisdom of Washington's relentless anti-communist interventions, not only in southern Africa but in other Cold War covert battlegrounds in Central America and Central Asia.



Former major general Richard Secord appears before the Iran-Contra committee on Capitol Hill, Washington, DC, May 5, 1987. (Credit: AP Photo / Lana Harris)

CHAPTER 13

CIVIL WARS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

By June 1979, a revolution in Nicaragua had reached its violent climax as some five thousand leftist Sandinista guerrillas battled their way into the slums of the capital city of Managua, fighting pitched battles against fifteen thousand National Guard troops who were defending the strongman Anastasio Somoza. As they slowly advanced through city streets beneath the Guard's devastating artillery barrages and air attacks, the rebels drew the noose ever tighter. On one particular day of bloody street fighting, Guard soldiers dragged ABC-TV reporter Bill Stewart out of his car, made him kneel, and shot him in the head as his camera crew captured the killing. The broadcast of that footage in the US would ensure that Washington would not directly intervene in the conflict. Amid the carnage, on July 17 President Somoza boarded a private jet to fly to his Miami mansion, ending a corrupt dynasty that had followed Washington's lead faithfully for over forty years.¹

With communism seemingly on the march in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, President Ronald Reagan launched a determined effort to secure Central America via US military advisers and CIA covert operations. Although there was little Soviet involvement in Central America in comparison to Angola or Afghanistan, Washington saw even a hint of subversion in its hemisphere as a serious threat to national security. Under the Reagan policy of fighting communism aggressively worldwide, US intervention in Central America intensified during the 1980s, producing counterinsurgency campaigns that killed two hundred thousand civilians in Guatemala and ninety-four thousand more in El Salvador while also unleashing a civil war in Nicaragua that caused thirty thousand deaths. As the sordid spectacle of death-squad killings and military massacres aroused

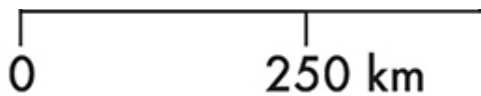
opposition among the American public, Congress moved to restrain covert operations in the region, producing a historic clash with the executive branch. Not only would intervention to counter communist advances end up ravaging the region, it would also produce a major political crisis in the United States.

As Congress grew more hesitant while the Reagan White House became ever more determined in its support for the CIA intervention in Nicaragua, the resulting executive-legislative clash culminated in the historic Iran-Contra controversy. Spanning seven years, that epic scandal, the largest and longest in US history, would represent a determined effort by Congress to recover its constitutional role in foreign policy and curtail the overweening executive powers that had accumulated during the forty years of the Cold War.

During the decade of intense US intervention in the 1980s, fighting would be concentrated in Central America's rugged northern tier of Guatemala, El Salvador, and the Honduras-Nicaragua borderlands—where mountain ranges reach thirteen thousand feet, much of the land has poor tropical soils, and frequent natural disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes add a strong element of risk to agriculture. With the prime hill country already occupied by sprawling banana and coffee plantations, the peasantry, representing over half that region's eighteen million people, was squeezed into small farms with thin soils and, at higher elevations, a harsh climate. Rising social tensions between landed oligarchs and those poor peasants coincided with the Cold War to create bloody civil conflicts, marked by murderous military operations and death-squad killings in both Guatemala and El Salvador. Indeed, among the many local conflicts that made up the Cold War, few could equal the extraordinary violence seen in those Central American civil wars. When the fighting finally ended in the 1990s, both countries would be left with a legacy of collective trauma manifest in gang violence that even now, decades later, still forces countless thousands to flee their homes for the safety of the US border.

CENTRAL AMERICA





A US BASTION IN HONDURAS

While El Salvador and Guatemala plunged into civil war, Honduras became Washington's anti-communist bastion in Central America. After that country's military leaders agreed to host training camps for CIA-backed Contra guerrillas and allow their raids into neighboring Nicaragua, Washington's aid for Honduras soared from \$4 million in 1980 to \$200 million in 1985.² Not only would that country serve as a secure base for the Contras, but it would also make extensive use of CIA torture training to constrain local leftists.

Small bands of Marxist guerrillas like the Movimiento Popular de Liberación-Cinchoneros challenged the Honduran military with bombings and assassinations. In response, the CIA trained an elite Honduran unit, Battalion 316, which was responsible for systematic torture and some three hundred extrajudicial killings. One of the trainees who went to Texas for training in 1980, Sergeant Florencio Caballero, reported that the American officers "taught us psychological methods—to study the fears and weaknesses of a prisoner. Make him stand up, don't let him sleep, keep him naked and isolated, . . . throw cold water on him, change the temperature."³

After their training, those soldiers would join Battalion 316 under the leadership of General Gustavo Álvarez Martínez. Described as a "vitriolic anti-communist . . . trained in Argentina," he rose to command the armed forces from 1982 to 1984 while continuing to operate his own death squad. One of those interrogated by Battalion 316, a young Marxist named Iñes Murillo, told the *New York Times* that she was tortured via electrical shock for thirty-five days and then soldiers, using the CIA's methods, fed "her raw dead birds and rats for dinner, threw freezing water on her naked body every half hour . . . and made her stand for hours without sleep and without being allowed to urinate." Despite reports of deaths and disappearances, Ambassador John D. Negroponte, Washington's point man in Central America, defended General Álvarez as "a hard man but an effective

officer.” However, the Honduran military apparently disagreed and, in March 1984, forced him into exile.⁴

Although the Honduran rebels scored some small victories, like assassinating General Álvarez when he returned home in 1989, the combination of harsh military repression and weak local support led to the quiet dissolution of the country’s insurgency at the close of the Cold War.⁵

CIVIL WAR IN GUATEMALA

During the Cold War’s first decade, Washington hailed the CIA coup that had toppled Guatemala’s reform government in 1954 as a brilliant success, but endemic poverty and deep racial divisions between the Maya and *ladino* populations soon turned the country into a social powder keg. After that coup, the US installed a new president, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, a repressive right-winger who sparked a cycle of violence that would spiral ever upward for the next forty years.⁶

Following three years of misrule by Castillo Armas that included the expulsion of thousands of peasants from their lands and ended with his assassination in 1957, the army seized power and presided over new elections, which were won by General Miguel Ydígoras, whom the CIA deemed “a moody, almost schizophrenic” ultra-rightist leader.⁷ When the CIA bribed him to use Guatemala as its base for the Bay of Pigs invasion, several thousand soldiers rebelled to protest the loss of sovereignty and, after a US bombing campaign, fled across the border into exile. In December 1962, two rebel officers emerged from the jungle to form the FAR (Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes) with about five hundred armed guerrillas.⁸ But in March 1963, before the insurgency could gain traction, President Ydígoras was ousted by his defense minister, Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia, who blamed him for allowing the former reformist president Juan Arévalo to campaign in the upcoming election. After taking office, President Peralta formed death squads that would kill up to eight thousand guerrillas, effectively repressing their revolt.⁹

Promising a “democratic opening,” law professor Julio César Méndez Montenegro took office in 1966 as the candidate of the centrist Partido Acción Revolucionaria, which had its origins in the democratic reforms of the 1940s. But the military, backed by an economic elite hostile to social

reform, would control counterinsurgency planning and arranged for US Special Forces advisers to train its troops, soon making them the most lethal in Central America. Only days after Méndez became president, Washington dispatched Marine Colonel John Webber Jr. to supply the country's five-thousand-man army with equipment to crush the left-wing guerrillas. As the army pushed into the Maya highlands, it armed civilian collaborators who, according to *Time* magazine, were "licensed to kill peasants whom they considered guerrillas," producing up to eight thousand deaths in just eighteen months. To critics of such harsh tactics, Colonel Webber insisted: "The Communists are using everything they have, including terror. And it must be met."¹⁰

Complementing Webber's military campaign, civilian adviser John Longan of the US Office of Public Safety, a CIA-controlled program that trained police officers worldwide, arrived in late 1965 with \$2.6 million to build a lethal internal security apparatus that would soon launch Operación Limpieza, culminating in the March 1966 murder of thirty labor activists, whose bodies were then dumped in the sea. Not only would Longan form a repressive apparatus responsible for fighting a bloody civil war over the next thirty years, but his efforts, historian Greg Grandin has argued, "perfected the signature act of Cold War violence: the literal disappearance of political opponents."¹¹

As the armed forces gained control of the countryside, the guerrillas, particularly the FAR, concentrated their attacks in Guatemala City. In January 1968, FAR guerrillas killed Colonel Webber in the capital. In August, they assassinated US ambassador John Gordon Mein as he was driving to the embassy.¹² On the other side of that deepening political divide, under the Méndez presidency, from 1966 to 1970 a combination of military pacification and death-squad operations would kill as many as fifteen thousand people, mostly Maya peasants in remote rural areas.¹³

In 1970, Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio captured the presidency, proclaiming that he would eliminate all the guerrillas, "even if it is necessary to turn the country into a cemetery." To set the stage for an unrestrained pacification program, President Arana declared a "state of siege," suspending all civil liberties and allowing military death squads to carry out seven hundred executions in just two months.¹⁴ The harsh repression inspired the formation of two new guerrilla organizations—the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres) and the

Organization of the People in Arms (Organización del Pueblo en Armas). Instead of the few hundred politically isolated guerrillas of the 1960s, these groups formed a “revolutionary union” that forged ties with Maya communities and fielded some 2,500 armed fighters. Concentrated largely in the “Indian highlands” and the lowlands surrounding the capital, they showed, according to US intelligence, “an increased capability to successfully ambush Army convoys and attack police stations.”¹⁵

With the guerrillas mobilized and the army primed for repression, Guatemala’s civil war entered a second, murderous phase that would continue for the next fifteen years, bringing mass death to Maya villages. Providing support for an escalation in violence, President Ronald Reagan not only reversed Jimmy Carter’s human rights policy after 1981 but also publicly embraced Guatemala’s military rulers. From 1981 to 1983, the Guatemalan military unleashed a scorched-earth campaign against highland Maya villages that destroyed hundreds of Indigenous communities, conducted six hundred massacres, and killed an estimated one hundred thousand villagers.¹⁶ As that wholesale slaughter continued, Reagan met with General Efraín Ríos Montt, the president responsible for most of the massacres, and praised him as “a man of great integrity” who was “totally committed to democracy,” while also expanding military aid to the country tenfold to \$104 million. Significantly, in 2013 a Guatemalan court would find Ríos Montt guilty of genocide for his Maya massacres.¹⁷

Although the US did cut off military aid to Guatemala at the end of the Cold War in 1990, the social conflict by then was so embedded in the countryside that it would rage on for another six years. Through the good offices of Norway and Spain, the U.N. finally negotiated a peace accord in 1996 that required the guerrilla fighters to disarm in exchange for promises of farmland.¹⁸

In April 1998, the Catholic Archdiocese published a report on the civil war, *Guatemala Never Again!*, finding that 90 percent of the 52,427 killings it was able to document had been committed by the military. Just two days after Bishop Juan José Gerardi released that report, three military officers beat him to death in his church with a concrete slab.¹⁹ A year later, the U.N.-sponsored Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification found that two hundred thousand people had been killed or had disappeared since the start of the civil war in 1962. In the most aggressive period of pacification,

from 1981 to 1983, 500,000 to 1.5 million people in a total population of only 7 million were displaced from their villages.^{[20](#)}

As sobering as such findings might be, they cannot capture the depth of social trauma those decades of civil warfare had left for contemporary Guatemala. By 2011, criminal gangs controlled about 40 percent of the country's sovereign territory through armed terror. As in neighboring El Salvador, such endemic gang violence created a climate of fear that, every year, forced tens of thousands of Guatemalans to flee through Mexico to the US border in search of safety.^{[21](#)}

Reflecting Guatemala's deep social divisions, when the distinguished diplomat Bernardo Arévalo, son of former progressive president Juan Arévalo, won the presidential elections in August 2023 by running on a reform program, he faced such a ferocious backlash by right-wing parties that sustained international pressure was needed to assure his inauguration.^{[22](#)}

CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR

Driven by a similar social divide between a landed oligarchy and impoverished peasants, neighboring El Salvador erupted in a parallel civil war during the late 1970s. In a cruel irony, Latin America's smallest, most overpopulated state would become the site of the largest US intervention in the region—lasting twelve years, costing \$6 billion in civil and military aid, and taking an estimated ninety-four thousand Salvadoran lives.^{[23](#)} Although Washington equated the conflict with Cold War communism, the country's struggle over land ownership dated back to the 1920s. As such tensions only heightened in the Cold War context, class conflict erupted into a full-blown civil war that became a maelstrom of savage violence.

In a marked contrast with Honduras and Guatemala, where the US-owned United Fruit Company was dominant, El Salvador's local oligarchy, known as “the fourteen families,” had by 1900 expropriated most of the arable land and reduced sharecroppers to landless laborers on coffee and cotton plantations. When the 1929 Depression led to the election of a socialist president, the oligarchy quickly replaced him with General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez—part of a Depression-era cohort of dictators that included Anastasio Somoza García in Nicaragua and Jorge

Ubico in Guatemala. After slaughtering thirty thousand people in “La Matanza” (The Massacre) to stop peasant opposition to elite land grabbing, President Hernández and his right-wing Pro Patria Party would rule El Salvador for the next thirteen years.²⁴

Following decades of military dictatorship, reformer José Duarte led his Christian Democratic Party in the 1972 elections, but the military and oligarchy rigged the outcome, sending him into exile for the next seven years.²⁵ In 1977, the military’s candidate, General Carlos Humberto Romero, won a fraudulent election with the support of ORDEN (Organización Democrática Nacionalista), a paramilitary group whose eighty thousand members operated death squads. It particularly targeted the liberal Christian Democratic Party, which was fragmenting because some of its radical factions were committed to land reform through armed struggle. Supported by aid from Washington, the military launched brutal pacification operations and extrajudicial killings that would further terrorize the country’s peasants, priests, teachers, and students but proved unable to break the revolutionary movement. By the late 1970s, therefore, the country was poised at the edge of a civil war between the army and guerrillas that would be fought with exceptional brutality for the next twelve years.²⁶

EL SALVADOR’S POLITICAL TURMOIL (1979–81)

As civil conflict intensified in late 1979, a group of idealistic junior officers, backed by moderate intellectuals and Catholic Church leaders, launched a coup that toppled the right-wing government of General Carlos Romero. A five-man junta (two officers and three civilians) hoped to better the country’s standard of living by freeing political prisoners, unraveling the terror organization ORDEN, nationalizing coffee exports, and enacting land reform. Within three months of its formation, however, the original junta had collapsed over the issue of land reform, and its successor tried to restore order by adding two members from the reformist Christian Democratic Party, including its leader José Duarte, a moderate who was ready to work with Washington. After his seven-year exile, however, Duarte proved to be unprepared for that historic moment and his party soon lost the support of the Church. With civilian politics under his leadership effectively

paralyzed, the army continued its wholesale repression, with brutal pacification, death-squad killings, and massacres.²⁷

Despite pleas from Archbishop Óscar Romero to deny all aid to the Salvadoran military, US president Jimmy Carter allocated \$5.7 million for that compromised government, foreshadowing the bloody decade that was to come. To steal the left's thunder, the Carter administration promoted land reform, which sparked a lethal reaction among the oligarchy, who induced their military allies to slaughter peasants en masse.²⁸ As the violence intensified, the nation's rich fled into exile taking \$5 billion in capital, which they largely deposited in offshore accounts. When land reform's failure sparked mass protests in the capital, San Salvador, the consequent military repression pushed leftists into the countryside, thereby creating, according to chief US military adviser Lieutenant Colonel James Steele, "a support base for the guerrillas."²⁹

While the government was fragmenting, the guerrillas were unifying. Through Cuban diplomacy and Soviet-bloc aid, a coalition of five leftist guerrilla groups formed the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional) in October 1980. Three months later, five thousand guerrillas launched a major offensive, capturing several provincial capitals. But in the end, they were defeated in pitched battles that cost them a thousand fighters.³⁰

In the months before and after that offensive, the Salvadorean military used US aid for operations that would slaughter thousands of suspected rebel sympathizers. Simultaneously, death-squad killings soared to five hundred monthly in the country's capital. Under the leadership of Colonel José Alberto Medrano, a close CIA ally, ORDEN would pass the names of communist suspects to the Mano Blanca death squad led by Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, who had resigned from the National Guard to enter what then passed for electoral politics in El Salvador. Amid intensifying political violence with two thousand killings in the first four months of 1980, a single shot felled Archbishop Óscar Romero, the head of the country's Catholic Church, as he was saying mass—a killing generally attributed to the work of D'Aubuisson. That December, the rising toll from death squads gained international visibility after National Guard soldiers raped and murdered three Catholic nuns and a lay worker, all Americans. As the violence escalated, the army slaughtered hundreds of residents at Santa Cruz in November 1981 and at El Mozote a month later.³¹

EXTREME VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR (1982–89)

After Carter left the White House in January 1981, President Ronald Reagan passed up the chance for peace talks following the failed FMLN offensive and instead backed an aggressive counterinsurgency campaign that would, within a decade, leave many thousands dead. Although Reagan increased US economic aid from \$58 million in 1980 to \$189 million in 1982, it could not compensate for the billions in working capital that had already left the country with the departure of the country's landed oligarchs, "the fourteen families." Recognizing the advantage of seventeen thousand US-trained Salvadorean troops held in fighting just four thousand guerrillas, President Reagan pressed for a military resolution to the situation.³² To that end, US military aid surged from just \$6 million in 1980 to \$197 million in 1984 and was used to double the size of the Salvadoran army to forty thousand troops.³³

The leader of Washington's ever-expanding military mission was Colonel James Steele, who commanded the fifty-five US advisers in El Salvador from 1984 to 1986, the peak of the counterinsurgency campaign. After graduating from the University of Dayton, Steele served in Vietnam, where he was decorated for leading reconnaissance units in heavy combat before transferring to Central America.³⁴ Arriving in El Salvador in 1984, Steele found the FMLN's ten thousand insurgents to be "probably *the* best guerrillas we've seen in this hemisphere." Their specialist units were well trained in "sapper techniques, infiltrating, and achieving surprise," while their large one-hundred-man military columns confronted the army "consistently," achieving "some major guerrilla successes . . . right up into 1984."³⁵ By contrast, the Salvadoran army was, Steele observed, a "garrison force" staffed with careerists averse to small-unit combat who favored massive brigade-sized sweeps with high civilian casualties that "alienated a lot of the people in the process."³⁶

From 1984 to 1986, US funding of \$200 million annually allowed Steele to build an intelligence system with "agent networks" and analytic fusion centers, expand the army to fifty thousand troops, and train officers for small-unit operations fought at night "with a lot of ambushes." In sum, the Salvadoran army became what Colonel Steele called "the best counter-terrorist force in the region."³⁷ Offering a more critical perspective, *The Guardian* newspaper reported that US advisers were training Salvadoran units that "developed a fearsome . . . reputation for their death squad

activities.” According to a later Amnesty International investigation, abuses by such US-trained troops included “extrajudicial executions, other unlawful killings, ‘disappearances’ and torture. . . . Whole villages were targeted by the armed forces and their inhabitants massacred.”³⁸

In addition to training troops, by 1986 US aid had enabled the creation of an air armada at San Salvador’s Ilopango Air Base with sixty helicopters and five AC-47 gunships. When the clandestine Iran-Contra operation started in 1985, Steele would become Washington’s man on the spot in San Salvador, using his control over the airport to facilitate clandestine arms shipments to the CIA’s Contra guerrillas fighting in nearby Nicaragua.³⁹

As the war entered its eighth year in 1988, a team of US military specialists led by the historian Andrew Bacevich, then an army lieutenant colonel, offered a nuanced assessment of the advisory effort. Since most American advisers were mediocre careerists, they could not develop “a competent officer corps” or promote agile tactics for the Salvadoran military. While that army was still using “conventional tactics to fight an unconventional war,” the guerrillas’ strategy had “changed radically,” replacing large formations with small-unit “hit-and-run attacks” suited to a “protracted struggle.” In a positive change on the government side, the army had reined in its “widespread human rights abuses,” reducing political murders from 610 per month in 1980 to “only” 23 in 1987.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, tainted by its association with Salvadoran death squads, Reagan’s policy was supported domestically by just 23 percent of Americans in 1984, producing pressure from Congress to end military involvement.⁴¹

El Salvador did have a fleeting chance for progress when Christian Democrat leader Duarte defeated D’Aubuisson, the candidate of the rightist ARENA party, for president in 1984 and initiated preliminary discussions with the FMLN rebels. But the government’s inflexible position soon led to the talks’ collapse. In the midst of civil war, Duarte’s government found itself caught in a crippling political cross fire—unable to resolve the conflict with the armed left because Washington refused to compromise, while the massive flow of US military aid weakened his ability to control the far right. As the war escalated apace in the countryside, Duarte’s party received ever fewer votes, allowing the rightist ARENA to become the country’s dominant political party.⁴²

NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT FOR EL SALVADOR (1989–92)

President Reagan's single-minded pursuit of a military resolution to the situation in El Salvador resulted in President Duarte's downfall in 1989, bringing the hard-right ARENA party to power under President Alfredo Cristiani and delaying peace for another two years. Amid such a bloody political paralysis, in November 1989 the FMLN mobilized its forces for another major offensive. Despite capturing large sections of the countryside, it again failed to defeat the military. In this way, however, the FMLN guerrillas had demonstrated an ability to rebuild its armed strength (even after two prior defeats) and so persuade the military leadership that even extreme tactics could not crush the revolt. Thanks to the failure of US advisers to develop "a coherent and feasible strategy," as one of them put it, the brutal fighting had dragged on for a decade until "both prize fighters fell in a heap from exhaustion." Adding to the pressure for peace talks, an elite Salvadoran commando squad, acting at the behest of the country's high command, stormed the campus of Central American University and massacred six Jesuit priests, sparking international condemnation that forced Washington to end its support for the military regime.⁴³

In January 1992, after twelve years of merciless combat, government and guerrilla leaders finally met in Mexico City to sign a peace agreement. Under that accord, the FMLN guerrillas agreed to lay down their arms and the government promised to abolish abusive military units, form a truth commission, and introduce land reform.⁴⁴ Allowed to compete in elections, the FMLN quickly won a mass following and became a major force in the country's democratic politics. The speed with which that peace agreement came together right at the end of the Cold War indicates that US aid and advocacy had played a central role in sustaining this protracted civil conflict.

THE AFTERMATH OF EL SALVADOR'S CIVIL WAR

The Reagan administration's relentless pursuit of a military solution to El Salvador's deeply rooted social conflict had lasting consequences for its society. As a start, the civil war displaced a million people in a population of five million and resulted in about ninety-four thousand deaths—ample

carnage for a collective national trauma. Despite Washington's expenditure of \$6 billion in civil and military aid, at the war's end more than 90 percent of the country's population still lived in extreme poverty, while the civil war had left behind the sort of "psychosocial trauma" that one Jesuit scholar called a "militarization of the mind."⁴⁵

The civil war's legacy was soon evident in a proliferation of criminal gangs. As the conflict had intensified after 1979, over a million Salvadorans fled the country and largely ended up in Los Angeles, where some of their children would form gangs, notably the violent MS-13. During the 1990s, US deportations of convicted criminals back to Central America surged from five thousand in 1995 to one hundred thousand in 2014. By 2021, estimates of gang membership in the region ranged from one hundred thousand in the northern tier of Central America to five hundred thousand in El Salvador alone—sheer numbers that often forced city residents to flee endemic violence.⁴⁶ As Central American outflows peaked in 2014 with ten thousand migrants arriving at the US border every month, researchers found that most of them were—as one might expect—from the northern triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, fleeing the "strong gang presence in communities."⁴⁷

After a quarter-century of gang terror, in March 2022 Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele suspended civil liberties and ordered a military crackdown that, over the next year, led to the arrest of sixty-five thousand suspected gang members, breaking the criminals' hold on the cities at a heavy political price. Running for reelection in 2024 as "the world's coolest dictator," Bukele won by a wide margin over the FMLN party. However, Amnesty International criticized his "gradual replacement of gang violence with state violence."⁴⁸

In a sad reminder of a path to peace not taken during the Cold War, in 2018 the Vatican canonized Archbishop Óscar Romero, whose persistent pleas for human rights had led to his assassination at the height of the civil war, making him a saint in the Roman Catholic tradition.

THE CONTRA WAR IN NICARAGUA

While civil wars were starting in El Salvador and Guatemala, Nicaragua was still in the iron grip of dictatorship. Military dictators cycled in and out

of office elsewhere in Central America, but President Anastasio Somoza Debayle was the descendant of a rapacious family dynasty that had ruled Nicaragua for forty years, condemning the country to persistent poverty. According to the US State Department, the “public outcry over Somoza’s abuses exploded after a devastating earthquake” destroyed Nicaragua’s major cities in 1972, and “Somoza’s . . . political cronies and military subordinates embezzled most of the international relief donations.” Outraged by such blatant theft, opposition movements began mobilizing, particularly the Sandinistas, a Christian-Marxist group inspired by the Catholic theology of liberation, which was influential in Latin America after the Vatican II convocation at Rome (1962–65).⁴⁹

Indicative of its relentless repression, the Somoza regime jailed Pedro Chamorro, publisher of the country’s leading newspaper, *La Prensa*, and then assassinated him in 1978—creating a martyr for the Sandinista struggle. When the Sandinistas’ revolutionary coalition finally captured Managua in July 1979, Somoza took his \$400 million fortune to Paraguay, where leftist assassins later riddled his Mercedes with machine-gun fire. Meanwhile, most of his murderous National Guard fled across the border into Honduras, where they established the Contra guerrilla army.⁵⁰

Viewing these events solely from a Cold War perspective, Washington saw Somoza’s downfall as another sign of communism’s advance in Central America. Since the Sandinista government espoused Marxism, President Reagan baptized the opposing Contra fighters as the “moral equal of our Founding Fathers” and ordered the CIA to support their struggle.⁵¹

The Agency’s aid for the Contras began in March 1981 when Congress approved funding for the group, allowing Reagan to authorize a CIA operation that, as he stated in a presidential “finding” (required for all covert operations), was aimed at blocking the flow of arms from Nicaragua to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.⁵² After recruiting veterans from Somoza’s National Guard who were now exiled in Honduras, the Agency launched a modest operation to train five hundred Contras in paramilitary skills. As CIA covert funds surged south and Agency air transports flew deep into jungles to deliver supplies, that small commando unit ballooned, in just twenty-four months, into an army of ten thousand guerrillas—far too large for their nominal mission of blocking arms shipments to El Salvador.⁵³

Indeed, in the fall of 1982, President Reagan expanded the operation into a mission to pressure the Sandinistas to cease their support for El Salvador’s

guerrillas by supporting daily Contra attacks on northern Nicaraguan villages. Under the command of Contra chief Enrique Bermúdez, they conducted raids that by late 1985 left behind, according to Managua, 3,886 killed and 4,731 wounded—violence that would cause 30,000 deaths by the war’s end.⁵⁴ While the Contras were capable of killing unarmed civilians, they proved incapable of decisive gains against the regular Sandinista military.

DIRECT CIA ATTACKS ON NICARAGUA (1982–84)

As Contra activities expanded, Congress, still reeling from the aftershocks of the Vietnam debacle, began a long, determined effort to control that covert operation. In December 1982, Democratic representative Edward Boland of Massachusetts introduced an amendment to the defense appropriations bill banning the use of any funds “for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua.” The House passed it by a resounding vote of 411–0, but the ban was not comprehensive and at first proved ineffective, leading Congress to steadily expand its prohibitions. During the four-year legislative battle that followed, a growing peace movement pressed Congress for legislative action that would somehow curb the spectacular killings sparked by US intervention. As almost a million Guatemalans and Salvadorans fled the maelstrom of military violence into the US and the Reagan administration responded with mass deportation, over 150 churches, supported by a thousand Christian and Jewish congregations, offered “sanctuary” for refugees facing deportation, while a movement of peace activists and immigration lawyers filed hundreds of asylum cases.⁵⁵

Ignoring that opposition, President Reagan provided the CIA with \$20 million in December 1982 to build the Contra army and begin an “arms interdiction” between Nicaragua and El Salvador. Then in September 1983, he issued a second executive “finding,” expanding the covert mission to include both arms interdiction and paramilitary pressure to force the Sandinistas to negotiate an end to their rule.⁵⁶

In early 1984, the CIA, acting on the president’s authority, secretly placed mines in Nicaragua’s deep-water ports in an attempt to cripple the country’s export economy.⁵⁷ That April, however, Republican senator Barry

Goldwater of Arizona revealed that the CIA had been involved in those mining operations, sparking sharp criticism from Congress since those operations clearly violated the Boland Amendment. Nicaragua filed a lawsuit at the International Court of Justice, but the Reagan administration refused to recognize the court's jurisdiction.⁵⁸

Although the White House could ignore international law, it could not openly defy the will of Congress. As the Boland bans began to bite in mid-1984, CIA director William Casey, a former tax lawyer skilled in financial manipulations, decided to insulate the CIA from any illegality by transferring the Contras' funding to Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a staffer with the National Security Council (NSC) inside the White House.⁵⁹ In an attempt to circumvent the will of Congress, the Reagan administration converted the NSC from a purely advisory body into an ad hoc covert-action agency, putting the White House on a glide path to political disaster since it lacked both the personnel and legal authority to successfully execute such a complex secret mission.

COVERT FUNDING FOR THE CONTRAS

Angry over the CIA's mining of Nicaragua's harbors, in October 1984 Congress strengthened the Boland bans by barring all military funding for the Contras until December 1986.⁶⁰ To sustain the secret war in the aftermath of such a comprehensive ban, the Reagan White House was forced to traffic in arms, while the Contras turned to drug smuggling, creating two major political scandals—the Dark Alliance cocaine controversy and the Iran-Contra affair.

After the Boland Amendment reduced their CIA funding, the Contras began using their bases inside Honduras as landing zones for aircraft carrying cocaine between Colombia and the southern United States, fueling the US crack-cocaine epidemic of the 1980s. A congressional investigation chaired by Senator John Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts, in the late 1980s discovered close ties between flights carrying humanitarian relief south to the Contras and cocaine smuggled north into the US.⁶¹ But that scandal would not have much political impact until 1996 when the *San Jose Mercury News* alleged that a Contra agent was supplying cocaine directly to

the Crips and Bloods, Los Angeles street gangs that had sparked the country's crack-cocaine pandemic.⁶²

In response to the firestorm of controversy that news report aroused among African Americans, the CIA's inspector general conducted an investigation that found, in a 1998 report, that the Agency had indeed formed an ad hoc alliance with the Caribbean's top cocaine smuggler, Alan Hyde. During the Boland embargos, the CIA had used his warehouses in the Bay Islands off the coast of Honduras to store arms for later shipment to the Contras. Although the CIA was aware that Hyde was "an alleged drug smuggler . . . widely known to various agencies" and was "the head of an air smuggling ring with contacts in the Tampa/St. Petersburg area," its headquarters still approved the leasing, in March 1988, of additional storage facilities from Hyde. In exchange for such assistance, the Agency protected Hyde from any narcotics investigations for five years at the peak of the crack-cocaine epidemic since, as an Agency memo put it, "his connection to [the CIA] is well documented and could prove difficult in the prosecution stage."⁶³ In effect, the CIA confirmed that its covert operation had become enmeshed in the Caribbean's covert netherworld of drug smuggling.

While CIA's collusion with cocaine traffickers was not revealed until the late 1990s, a delay that blunted its political impact, the Reagan administration's decision to fund the Contra war by selling arms to the Islamic Republic of Iran was exposed while the operation was still ongoing. The Iran-Contra controversy became the greatest political scandal of the Cold War era, culminating in criminal indictments for six senior officials and producing a profound shift in the conduct of covert operations.

THE IRAN-CONTRA SCANDAL

To fund the Contras in defiance of the Boland bans and simultaneously address a hostage crisis in the Middle East, the White House formed a privatized covert apparatus within the National Security Council, which secretly sold arms to Iran and used the profits to help fund the CIA's Contra rebels. Of the \$380 million that the US gave the Contras from 1981 to 1990, Congress appropriated \$322 million, foreign donors like Saudi Arabia provided \$54 million, and about \$4 million came from those illegal arms sales to Iran. Compared to the scale of government appropriations, the \$54

million in private funding and \$4 million from arms sales may seem small, but both played a critical role in sustaining Contra operations during the Boland bans from October 1984 to October 1986.⁶⁴

In response to the Boland prohibition of any support for the Contras, the National Security Council became involved, as early as May 1984, in covert fundraising operations that came to be known, however ironically, as “Project Democracy.” As a top priority for the Reagan administration, the operation was headed by senior White House officials—including the National Security Adviser, Robert C. McFarlane; his successor, Admiral John Poindexter; NSC staffer Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North; and CIA director William Casey. Acting on the president’s instructions to keep the Contras’ “body and soul” together during the Boland bans, Project Democracy raised that \$54 million from donors such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Taiwan, and Chile.⁶⁵

But once those funds dried up and the Boland bans began to bite hard in late 1984, Project Democracy morphed into a privatized covert apparatus called “the enterprise” that began selling arms illegally to Iran, in defiance of an existing embargo, while diverting the profits to fund the Contras. To manage the enterprise in all its considerable complexity, CIA director Casey and Lieutenant Colonel North turned to a retired Air Force general, Richard Secord. After graduating from West Point in 1953, Secord had joined the Air Force as “a hot fighter pilot,” helped lead the secret war in Laos with CIA operatives Theodore Shackley and Thomas Clines, and later served as chief air adviser to Iran in the 1970s. Not only did his covert career teach him how to break rules, but it also gave him a mastery of the “clandestine arts,” which he now used to build “the enterprise” into a globe-girding covert apparatus capable of delivering arms to Iran and airlifting weaponry to the Contras—making him Washington’s man on the spot in, all too paradoxically, Washington, DC.⁶⁶ Instead of fighting communist guerrillas on some far-off tropical frontier, General Secord’s sub-rosa role required him to zip around the nation’s capital in his red Porsche for bureaucratic battles with federal agencies.⁶⁷

Between August 1985 and October 1986, the enterprise defied a US embargo on arms sales to Iran by making a total of six shipments of missiles to Tehran that delivered 2,004 TOWs, 18 HAWKs, and 240 HAWK spare parts generating about \$16 million in earnings.⁶⁸ From those profits, the enterprise acquired five cargo aircraft to provide the Contras with 348

tons of weapons, worth \$4 million—including three thousand AK-47 rifles, 7.5 million rounds of ammunition, two hundred rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and five thousand RPGs rounds.⁶⁹

To deliver those arms to Contra bases inside Honduras, the enterprise worked with Colonel James Steele, chief of the US Military Group in El Salvador, who made San Salvador's Ilopango airport the “main operational base” for General Secord's two C-123 air transports and two smaller C-7 Caribou aircraft. In addition to arranging landing rights, refueling, and maintenance from the local air force, Steele provided Secord's “pilots with weather data, intelligence on Nicaraguan government forces, and advice on how to avoid radar detection.” Significantly, the local CIA station chief refused to help the operation, believing it a clear violation of the Boland Amendment.⁷⁰

To sustain the Contras' ten-thousand-man militia, the enterprise grew into an agile covert apparatus with an operational reach across three continents through front corporations, numbered Swiss bank accounts, transport aircraft, contract pilots, airfields, covert operatives, an intelligence center, secret encryption devices, and even an oceangoing freighter.⁷¹ Indeed, General Secord himself testified “that it was fair to describe the Enterprise as his own covert operations organization.” To manage such an ambitious globe-spanning enterprise, he collaborated with an extraordinary coterie of clandestine operatives, including Thomas Clines, a thirty-year CIA veteran who had served as deputy station chief in Laos, and senior Agency officer Theodore Shackley, who had headed Operation Mongoose in Miami, managed the secret war in Laos, and directed the Phoenix Program in South Vietnam.⁷²

Despite all that undercover expertise, the enterprise group proved remarkably inept in their covert dealings. After just two years, an obscure Lebanese newspaper, *al-Shiraa*, reported many of the operation's key details with stunning accuracy, sparking several investigations in the US that uncovered a tangled tale that ran something like this:

During the 1980s, the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah, which was closely allied with Iran, kidnapped some eighty-seven foreigners, including forty-three Europeans and seventeen Americans. At the time, Iran's Islamic Republic was fighting a bloody war against Iraq and desperately needed anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to counter Baghdad's Soviet-made tanks and jet fighters. At Hamburg, Germany, in November

1984, former CIA official Ted Shackley made initial contact with the Iranian wheeler-dealer Manucher Ghorbanifar—a former SAVAK agent who was then a Mossad asset. Subsequently, General Secord followed up with meetings at five-star hotels in London and Paris, where the shadowy Ghorbanifar offered to use his contacts to arrange the release of several American hostages held in Lebanon.⁷³

At first blush, the CIA, the Defense Department, and the NSC were apprehensive about Ghorbanifar. Indeed, the CIA had labeled him a “fabricator” after he had earlier lied to American authorities about Libyan hit squads plotting to assassinate President Reagan. Even General Secord, who worked closely with him, described the Iranian as “the grossest, most bald-faced liar I’ve ever come across.”⁷⁴ Still, determined to complete a deal, the enterprise maintained relations with Ghorbanifar in mid-1985 as he made contact with Saudi arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi and Israeli agents at London, where he solicited Tehran’s help in releasing American hostages held by its ally Hezbollah in Lebanon. In exchange for such assistance, the Reagan White House would arrange for Israel to sell Iran approximately one hundred Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided missiles, or TOWs.⁷⁵

In August 1985, National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane and his deputy John Poindexter informed President Reagan about the possibility of selling arms to Iran in exchange for the release of those hostages. After the president telephoned McFarlane and authorized the Israeli missile sale, Tel Aviv, starting in August 1985, sent 96 TOWs to Iran for a price of \$1.2 million. But no hostages were released. Following intense arguments over the failed transaction, in September 1985 Ghorbanifar and Israeli officials agreed to ship 408 more TOWs to Iran for \$4 million. In return, one American hostage, Reverend Benjamin Weir, was finally released in Beirut on September 15.⁷⁶ On balance, then, the first arms sales to Iran were largely a failure.

Nonetheless, in November 1985, the president authorized another Israeli sale of eighty HAWK anti-aircraft missiles and a US shipment of forty more in exchange for the release of all the American hostages held in Lebanon. But after the first missile shipment arrived in Tehran on November 18, the Iranians learned that the model they received could not down Iraq’s jets and canceled the deal. Prior to the delivery, however, Colonel North had demanded that the Israeli government pay for the shipping in advance by

depositing a million dollars in the Swiss bank account of Lake Resources, one of the enterprise's front companies. After receiving the advance, the enterprise only delivered eighteen missiles at a transport cost of \$150,000 and so banked an \$850,000 surplus.⁷⁷ In effect, this almost-accidental transaction created a business model that the full-blown Iran-Contra operation would soon use on a much larger scale.⁷⁸

After this second failure, on December 5, 1985, a frustrated President Reagan signed an executive "finding" authorizing secret arms-for-hostages negotiations with Iran using weapons taken directly from US stocks. To advance that plan, he signed another presidential finding on January 17, 1986, approving direct arms sales to Iran despite the formal arms embargo still in place. In this way, the White House sold a thousand TOW missiles to Iran in February, producing a \$6 million surplus that Colonel North diverted to purchase weapons for the Contras—now the project's main goal.⁷⁹

That May, President Reagan agreed to ship HAWK missile parts to Iran on the condition (once again) that all US hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon be released. The deal would, however, unfold in phases. To begin the negotiations, Colonel North and former national security adviser Robert McFarlane flew to Tehran on May 28, carrying a Bible signed by the president, a cake, and a planeload of missile parts—in effect, making a down payment on further weapons shipments to secure the release of those hostages. On July 26, a single hostage, Father Lawrence Jenco, was released, and the White House sent the promised additional planeloads of missile parts to Iran. On October 5, however, the enterprise suddenly unraveled when a Sandinista soldier fired a SAM-7 missile that brought down one of General Secord's C-123 aircraft in Nicaragua carrying arms to the Contras, allowing the soldiers to capture the sole survivor, a talkative American cargo handler named Eugene Hasenfus. Not only did that crash end the Contra supply effort, but it also exposed much of the enterprise network to the American press. Nonetheless, Secretary of State George Shultz, his deputy, and several CIA officers lied, denying that there had been any US government involvement.⁸⁰

Two weeks later on October 17, 1986, the president scored a rare victory when Congress approved \$100 million in military and civilian aid for the Contras, ending the Boland Amendment's ban and the very reason for the Iran-Contra operation. Nonetheless, ten days after that, the enterprise dispatched a final arms shipment of five hundred more TOW missiles to

Iran. On November 2, Lebanese guerrillas released a third American hostage, David Jacobsen, who appeared at a celebratory White House ceremony with the president.⁸¹

That sense of victory, however, proved surprisingly short-lived. That same day, the Lebanese newspaper *al-Shiraa*, with sources inside Syrian intelligence, exposed the Iran-Contra operation for what it was by detailing McFarlane's visit to Tehran. After the speaker of Iran's parliament quickly confirmed the story and the *New York Times* put the news on its front page, the president issued a vehement (yet unconvincing) denial. Almost immediately, CIA director Casey ordered the enterprise group to "get rid of things, clean things up." After a frantic "shredding party" at the White House and Secord's offices, Colonel North assured his NSC superior, Admiral Poindexter, that all incriminating documents had been destroyed. On November 22, 1986, however, an FBI search of the White House found a smoking-gun memo written by North himself stating that "\$12 million will be used to purchase critically needed supplies for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance Forces." The next day, Attorney General Edwin Meese confronted Colonel North, who dissimulated about the diversion of funds to the Contras.⁸²

Just two days later, on November 25, President Reagan stunned the enterprise team by appearing on television and claiming, "I was not fully informed on the nature of one of the activities undertaken," which "raises serious questions of propriety." He then announced that Admiral Poindexter had resigned as national security adviser and Colonel North had been fired. After the president left the podium without taking questions, Attorney General Meese added that up to \$30 million in profits from the arms sales to Iran had been "deposited in bank accounts which were under the control" of US officials supporting the Contras.⁸³

The next day, the president announced an executive investigation headed by former senator John Tower, who launched an immediate inquiry to meet a tight sixty-day reporting deadline. From the outset, the Tower Commission's work was hampered by the stubborn silence of most enterprise principals, the hospitalization of CIA director William Casey, and the attempted suicide of Robert McFarlane, who took a drug overdose of thirty valium tablets just hours before his scheduled testimony.⁸⁴

After reviewing the ample documentary evidence that had escaped the shredders, however, the Tower Commission found that the culpability for

such questionable operations lay with the president, the NSC, and the CIA, charging that Admiral Poindexter had “failed grievously on the matter of contra diversion.” More broadly, the commission concluded that “the arms sales to Iran and N.S.C. support of the contras demonstrate the risks involved when highly controversial initiatives are pursued covertly.”⁸⁵

On March 4, 1987, President Reagan addressed a national television audience to discuss the Tower report, saying, “Its findings are honest, convincing, and highly critical; and I accept them.” He added that the report did not address the transfer of funds to the Nicaraguan Contras, “so the facts here will be left to . . . the court-appointed Independent Counsel. . . . As I told the Tower board, I didn’t know about any diversion of funds to the contras.”⁸⁶

In pursuit of facts about those diversions, Senate and House investigative committees held joint Iran-Contra televised hearings, while interviewing over five hundred witnesses from May to August 1987. As the first witness, General Secord testified that CIA director Casey had cooperated with both the arms sales and the diversion of funds to the Contras, setting a self-exculpatory tone that most other witnesses also adopted.⁸⁷ In their report issued in November 1987, the committees found that not only had the enterprise principals defied the will of Congress, but several advisers had “lied, shredded documents, and covered up their actions.” In its most substantive conclusion, the committee’s majority report stated: “The covert program of support for the contras evaded the Constitution’s most significant check on executive power: The President can spend funds on a program only if he can convince Congress to appropriate the money.”⁸⁸

Once those information-gathering inquiries were finished, a special prosecutor had the unenviable task of determining criminal liability. Appointed in December 1986 at the height of the Iran-Contra scandal, prosecutor Lawrence Walsh would spend the next six years and \$37 million investigating the affair and indicting three senior CIA officials and three cabinet members, including former national security advisers McFarlane and Poindexter, as well as Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. Although death spared CIA director Casey, three of his most senior officials were similarly indicted—including CIA deputy director for operations Clair George; chief of the CIA’s Latin American division, Duane Clarridge; and chief of the CIA Central American Task Force, Alan D. Fiers Jr. In the end, the special prosecutor won eleven convictions, but all were overturned on

appeal largely because Congress had given them prior partial immunity to encourage their testimony. The most culpable, Oliver North and John Poindexter, had their convictions reversed on appeal for similar reasons. Only General Secord's close comrade from the secret war in Laos, Thomas Clines, went to prison, serving sixteen months for failing to pay tax on the \$880,000 he earned buying arms for the enterprise. In December 1992, moreover, President George H. W. Bush would pardon six defendants, including issuing a controversial preemptive pardon for former defense secretary Weinberger. In his defense, Bush stated: "The common denominator of their motivation—whether their actions were right or wrong—was patriotism."⁸⁹ Nonetheless, the prosecutions, in all their stress and humiliation, sent a clear signal to the country's political leaders and its clandestine services about the legal limits of covert operations.

Among the prominent Iran-Contra principals, the only one to escape indictment was Washington's man on the spot in Central America, Colonel James Steele. After he gave evasive testimony to Congress about his role in the operation, the Senate blocked his promotion to general in 1988 and again in 1991.⁹⁰ Not only did this rebuke punish him for participating in an illegal covert operation, but it also cut him free from the military hierarchy for more confidential missions as the Pentagon's man on the spot, first reorganizing the local police in Panama after the US invasion of that country in 1989 and later serving as "senior police adviser with the Iraqi police . . . in Baghdad," using harsh tactics developed in El Salvador.⁹¹ Despite a determined congressional effort at reform, the US involvement in Central America had created both the necessary cadre and concepts for future covert interventions.

THE LEGACY OF CENTRAL AMERICA'S SECRET WARS

This protracted, painful covert war left a multifaceted legacy. To maintain its dominion over Central America, Washington had pursued an anti-communist campaign marked by violence and corruption without precedent or parallel in other Cold War battlegrounds. At a local level, established elites like the Guatemalan military and the Salvadoran oligarchy used Washington's anti-communist crusade to secure external support for their continuing struggles against local rivals, whether land-hungry peasants or

leftist labor unions, thereby turning long-running social conflicts into murderous civil wars.

After arming the Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran militaries, training their troops in torture, and promoting aggressive counterinsurgency, the US would play a marginal role in the region's search for peace at the close of the Cold War. In 1988, the president of Costa Rica, Óscar Arias, led the region in negotiating a cease-fire for Nicaragua, followed by free elections in February 1990 that led to the Sandinistas' defeat by Violeta Chamorro, the widow of a martyred newspaper editor. Within a year, the UN mediated a similar end to El Salvador's civil war, with the Marxist FMLN signing a peace agreement in Mexico allowing it to contest elections as a legal political party. In a parallel process four years later, the UN would play a central role in negotiating a peace accord in Guatemala.⁹²

In the aftermath of protracted civil warfare, those Central American nations would carry a collective trauma that inclined them all to authoritarian rule. The region's path to democracy and development seemed, at best, difficult, as shown by the entrenched Sandinista rule in Nicaragua by autocrat Daniel Ortega (lasting eighteen years at this writing); the triumphal reelection of the self-described "dictator" Nayib Bukele in El Salvador; and the struggles of progressive Bernardo Arévalo, forced to fight a set of oligarchs in Guatemala to secure office after his election.

For the United States, the Iran-Contra affair showed that a foreign policy that relied on covert operations concealed from Congress and the citizenry was incompatible with democracy and the rule of law. After Congress banned CIA aid to the Contras, the Reagan White House defied the legislature and created a privatized covert apparatus, forcing those legislators to push back by asserting their constitutional authority over war-making. The upshot was a historic confrontation between the executive and the legislative branches that made the Iran-Contra controversy the longest and most consequential political scandal in American history.

That controversy would prove to be the culmination of a decades-long struggle by Congress to assert its constitutional authority over war-making that started during the Vietnam War. That legislative effort included the War Powers Act of 1973 (requiring the president to consult with Congress to send troops overseas); the Hughes-Ryan Amendment of 1974 (requiring a formal presidential "finding" for covert operations); the Clark Amendment from 1976 to 1985 (banning covert funds for Angola); and, above all, the

Boland Amendments of 1984–86 (barring funds for the Nicaraguan Contras).⁹³

Ultimately, the Iran-Contra scandal revealed how the CIA's forty years of illegality overseas—marked by electoral manipulation, military coups, and the assassination of foreign leaders—had migrated homeward to compromise the country's democracy. During his testimony in the Iran-Contra hearings, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North justified his misstatements to Congress about supporting the Contras. The statements were, he admitted, “erroneous, misleading, evasive and wrong,” but they were made “with the purpose of . . . avoiding a shut-off of help for the Nicaraguan resistance.” In response, John W. Nields Jr., chief counsel for the House committee, commented tellingly with a rhetorical question: “We do live in a democracy . . . in which it is the people not one Marine lieutenant colonel that get to decide important policy issues for the nation?”⁹⁴

Indeed, throughout a succession of CIA secret wars in Cuba, Laos, Angola, Afghanistan, and now Nicaragua, presidential power had grown and congressional oversight of foreign policy had withered. When the legislature blocked the executive from using the CIA to fight a covert war in Nicaragua, the Reagan White House took the next fateful step by creating a privatized clandestine apparatus—what Lieutenant Colonel North called “a full-service covert operation”—to continue its Contra war in defiance of Congress.⁹⁵

Now, Congress was reasserting its constitutional authority over warfare, both covert and conventional, thereby creating pressure for the appointment of special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh. In his view, two presidents, Nixon and Reagan, had “desecrated the rule of law” by engaging in “illegal clandestine activities.” After more than six years of investigation and indictment, his prosecution of three cabinet-level officials and three prominent CIA officials served notice on official Washington that the president's extralegal war-making powers through covert operations, created to fight the Cold War, were at an end.⁹⁶

For all their bravado and brash defiance, the Cold War's last cohort of empowered covert operatives, including several men on the spot, were finally held accountable for their crimes—forced to testify in public, denied promotion, indicted, prosecuted, fined, and even jailed. For the executive's covert-action arm, such punishments suggested that the CIA would no

longer enjoy impunity when it conducted covert operations that crossed the line into illegality.

The golden age of espionage created by the Cold War had ended.



Howard Hart, narrating an oral history of his experiences in the wartime Philippines, 2020. (Credit: Courtesy of National World War II Museum)

CHAPTER 14

AFGHANISTAN'S IMPERIAL GRAVEYARD

In February 1989, a long line of Red Army tanks flying red banners fluttering in the winter's wind crossed the Friendship Bridge from Afghanistan into the Soviet Union. Behind them, walking arm-in-arm with his teenaged son, came their commander, General Boris Gromov, who told a battery of television cameras, "You saw that I didn't look back." He added: "My thoughts are with the soldiers who pulled out before me, and with those who did not get out alive."¹ Indeed, by then the Red Army had suffered fifteen thousand killed, thirty-five thousand wounded, and serious demoralization among the survivors.

This decade-long war in Afghanistan was one of several regional conflicts so protracted and intense that they constitute a distinct final phase of the Cold War. Once the endless Vietnam War ended in 1975, the global rivalry between Moscow and Washington shifted to proxy wars elsewhere in the Third World—in Central America, Southern Africa, and Central Asia. Not only did local surrogates fight with an extraordinary brutality that turned such covert battlegrounds into Cold War wastelands, but those conflicts also left an indelible imprint on the two superpowers. Just as Washington's covert intervention in Central America culminated in the deeply divisive Iran-Contra scandal, so Moscow's protracted war in Afghanistan would significantly cripple the Soviet military.

Just four years after the North Vietnamese army rolled into Saigon in April 1975, driving Soviet-made tanks and trucks, Washington decided to even the score by launching a CIA covert operation in Afghanistan aimed at giving Moscow its own Vietnam. Like many of Washington's covert interventions during the Cold War, this surrogate war in Afghanistan would prove a short-term success that had hidden long-term negative

consequences. For not only did it inflict heavy losses on the Soviet Union, but it also left behind an Islamic insurgency and a burgeoning drug trade that would later produce profound difficulties for the United States as well.

CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

The CIA's intervention in Afghanistan coincided with a profound crisis in US foreign policy across a vast swath of the globe stretching from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan. By the time the Cold War's final phase started in 1975, America's position in this strategic region rested on a single ally, the shah of Iran, whom the CIA described as "a hollow man, a straw man, a pipsqueak."² When mobs in Tehran toppled his dictatorship in February 1979, they not only destroyed a regime that was Washington's surrogate guardian of the Persian Gulf, but also removed the geopolitical keystone in the arch of US security across the entire Middle East, collapsing it into irresolvable instability.

While the shah's rule was crumbling in the late 1970s, a growing crisis in neighboring Afghanistan added to Washington's troubles in the region. With the Soviet Union to the north and US-allied Pakistan to the south, the royalist regime in landlocked Afghanistan had, for nearly thirty years, maintained a tenuous neutrality in the Cold War, receiving aid from both superpowers. Lying at the northern extremity of the annual monsoon rains, Afghanistan was an arid land that struggled to feed its population of fifteen million, most of whom depended on farming and herding for survival. But beneath the surface calm of royal rule, elite rivals maneuvered for power, Islamic militants plotted revolt, and communist factions agitated for social change, pulling Afghanistan into a vortex of political volatility.³

After a peaceful forty-year reign, Afghanistan's King Zahir Shah was deposed in 1973 by his ambitious cousin, Mohammed Daoud Khan, who seized power with the support of army officers allied with the communist party's "moderate" Parcham faction. Once in office, he would play Moscow and Washington against each other for five years, gradually consolidating his position until, in 1977, he was able to establish one-party rule. As an ethnic Pashtun nationalist, Daoud refused to recognize the Durand Line—the border drawn by the British in the 1890s between Pakistan and Afghanistan that left many Pashtuns, his country's largest ethnic group,

inside Pakistan. As prime minister in the 1950s, Daoud had called for the reunification of all Pashtuns inside an expanded Afghanistan, a ploy he revived during his first years as dictator. To check that challenge, Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence sent guerrillas led by the Islamic militant Gulbuddin Hekmatyar into the country's northeast—marking Pakistan's debut as a player in Afghan politics. To placate Islamabad and end Hekmatyar's revolt, Daoud visited Pakistan in March 1978 for negotiations that recognized their mutual border and effectively abandoned his advocacy of Pashtun nationalism.⁴

With his foreign policy problems resolved, Daoud quickly pivoted to domestic issues by arresting communists opposed to his strongman rule, prompting the party's rival factions to reconcile just long enough for a bloody coup in April 1978. After executing Daoud, the communists' radical Khalq faction replaced him with their leader, the novelist Nur Mohammad Taraki. With the help of Russian KGB operatives, Taraki formed a cult of personality as "the great leader," conducted a terror campaign that arrested twelve thousand political prisoners, and attempted a countrywide purge of Islamic cultural practices. In a rapid-fire burst of reforms that outraged conservative Muslims, he decreed rights for women, literacy for girls, and the abolition of Islamic lending practices. As Islam-inspired revolts erupted across the country, army captain Ismail Khan led his followers in slaughtering a dozen Russian advisers and their families in the western city of Herat, displaying their heads on pikes. With Soviet military support, Taraki tried to put down the unrest with air strikes against the Islamic rebels that killed at least twenty thousand Afghans, while driving sixty thousand refugees into Iran and four hundred thousand more into Pakistan.⁵

In early 1979, at least six months *before* the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the White House decided to support Afghanistan's Islamic resistance as a means of checking Moscow's power in the greater Middle East and shoring up its own weakened position in the region. In a December 1978 memo to President Jimmy Carter, his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, warned of a Soviet advance along an "arc of crisis" extending from Ethiopia to Afghanistan, which was, he said, "a region of vital importance to us . . . threatened with fragmentation." He added that the resulting "political vacuum might well be filled by elements more sympathetic to the Soviet Union," confronting the West "with a challenge of historic proportions."⁶

Though deemed stunningly original at the time, Brzezinski had derived his “arc of crisis” idea from Sir Halford Mackinder’s 1904 essay articulating the geopolitical concept of the “marginal crescent,” a historic zone of recurring conflict along the southern rim of Eurasia. In a later lecture to the CIA that reflected his reading of Mackinder, Brzezinski argued that such an arc of crisis had been in place since 1945 thanks to “the American-Soviet contest . . . ultimately centered on the question as to who will . . . control the Eurasian Continent.” While East Asia and Europe were now stable, Eurasia’s Southwest Asian front, “in the wake of the collapse of Iran and the Soviet aggression in Afghanistan,” had become “the area where there is the highest potential for some direct American-Soviet collision.”⁷ At a Vienna summit meeting with Carter in June 1979, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev dismissed the “rather strange theory . . . known as the arc of crisis” as “an absolute fairy tale.” But by then, the Carter White House was firmly wedded to it.⁸

In April 1979, eight months before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, Brzezinski convinced the National Security Council to “be more sympathetic to those Afghans who were determined to preserve their country’s independence.”⁹ As an émigré Polish aristocrat dedicated to the liberation of Eastern Europe, Brzezinski believed that, by driving a political wedge from Afghanistan into Soviet Central Asia, he could potentially break up the Soviet empire and even possibly free its satellite states some three thousand miles away in Eastern Europe. When Carter approved \$400,000 to support the Afghan opposition in July 1979, Brzezinski wrote the president that “this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.” As Brzezinski later told an interviewer: “We didn’t push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would. . . . That secret operation was an excellent idea. Its effect was to draw the Russians into the Afghan trap.”¹⁰

While the White House was plotting, Afghanistan was plunging ever deeper into political instability, with spreading Islamic resistance in the countryside and bitter infighting among communist factions in the capital. When President Taraki tried to eliminate his party rival Hafizullah Amin in September 1979, the assassination attempt went badly awry. In the ensuing struggle, Amin actually killed President Taraki, shocking the Kremlin. Once he took power and showed signs of leaving the Soviet orbit, the KGB

intelligence bureau decided Amin was a CIA asset, in part because he had attended Columbia University in New York in the early 1960s.¹¹

Convinced that Amin was about to double-cross them in the fashion of Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat, the Soviet leadership decided to invade Afghanistan. On December 7, 1979, the Soviet KGB security service smuggled a more pliable communist alternative, Babrak Karmal, into Kabul and kept him under close guard until Amin could be eliminated. During a Politburo meeting in Moscow several days later, the Kremlin's top leaders—KGB chief Yuri Andropov, Defense Minister Dimitry Ustinov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and ideologue Mikhail Suslov—agreed that intervention was justified.¹² So, on December 25 some twenty-five thousand Red Army troops started landing at the Afghan capital of Kabul aboard 280 transport aircraft. Two days later, seven hundred KGB Special Unit troops fought their way past the presidential guard into the historic Tajbeg Palace, where they summarily executed President Amin, his relatives, and his closest aides. Within a year, Moscow had eighty thousand troops inside Afghanistan, harried by Islamic rebels and responding to their resistance with unchecked brutality.¹³

On December 26, 1979, the day after the Soviet invasion, Brzezinski wrote President Carter that this was an opportune moment to give Moscow “its Vietnam War.” More broadly, he suggested that the Soviet intervention had profound geopolitical implications. “If the Soviets succeed in Afghanistan, and if Pakistan acquiesces,” Brzezinski said, “the age-long dream of Moscow to have direct access to the Indian Ocean will have been fulfilled. Historically, the British had provided the barrier to that drive and Afghanistan was their buffer state.” He added: “We assumed that role in 1945, but the Iranian crisis has led to the collapse of the balance of power in Southwest Asia. . . . Accordingly, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan poses for us an extremely grave challenge.”¹⁴

As Soviet troops spread out across Afghanistan, President Carter denounced the invasion as “a callous violation of international law,” canceled the Strategic Arms Limitation II treaty he had recently signed, and ordered the CIA to mobilize aid for Afghanistan's Islamic jihadist guerrillas, known as the *mujahedin*. But the Agency was initially cautious about this intervention, with its director, Stansfield Turner, calling it “a hopeless cause.” Ultimately, however, Brzezinski prevailed, persuading the president to authorize \$500 million for the CIA's Operation Cyclone, which

was also meant to use Afghanistan as a springboard to stir up fundamentalism among the Muslims of Soviet Central Asia.¹⁵

In a first step to mobilizing the Western alliance for war, Brzezinski flew to the Middle East where he met with Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and Pakistan's leader, General Zia ul-Haq. As Sadat later recalled, Brzezinski said: "Please open your stores for us so that we can give the Afghanis the armaments they need to fight." Indeed, Sadat gave the Afghans weapons—as did Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, who agreed to match CIA expenditures dollar for dollar. Simultaneously, Defense Secretary Harold Brown traveled to Beijing, where he won China's assistance in mending frayed relations with Pakistan. Within weeks, supplies started flowing through Pakistan into Afghan liberated zones—anti-tank weapons from China, AK-47s from Egypt, and a miscellany of weapons old and new from the CIA.¹⁶

With Iran now hostile to the US, Washington's sole access to Afghanistan was through Pakistan. Although Islamabad had long been a Cold War ally, Carter's influence was initially constrained by cool relations with Pakistani president Zia ul-Haq, who had seized power in a 1977 coup, executing his civilian predecessor, a close American ally. When Carter offered Pakistan \$400 million in military aid to serve as a front-line state for the Afghan war, Zia rejected it as "peanuts." Once President Reagan took office in 1981, however, the White House announced a \$3 billion program of military aid to Pakistan, including the sale of forty advanced F-16 jet fighters, an offer that Zia readily accepted.¹⁷

The CIA worked through Zia's chosen instrument, Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence, to recruit Afghan guerrillas, starting a complex relationship of mutual manipulation. As the White House mobilized for covert warfare in May 1979, Pakistani intelligence offered the CIA's envoy an alliance with just one leader—its own Afghan client, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of the fundamentalist Hezb-i-Islami guerrillas. Surprisingly, the CIA accepted Pakistan's lopsided bargain and, over the next decade, would give Hekmatyar more than half of its \$2 billion in covert aid. During that decade of covert warfare, the American media published only positive reports about him. Not until the Soviet troops withdrew in 1989 did the press change its perspective, with the *New York Times* reporting what it then called "the sinister nature of Mr. Hekmatyar" and the *Washington Post* publishing a front-page exposé of his heroin

trafficking. In his definitive 2004 study of the Afghan war, reporter Steve Coll described him as “a cold, ruthless, effective leader who tolerated no dissent and readily ordered the deaths of his opponents.”¹⁸

THE START OF COVERT WARFARE

For the first five years, 1979 to 1984, the CIA's covert war was fought in rural areas that did not seriously threaten Moscow's client regime in Kabul. Encouraged by generous US aid, Pakistan opened its borderlands to three million Afghan refugees and allowed the CIA to use its frontier to launch covert operations without restraint. The Pakistan military's National Logistics Cell even trucked much of the CIA's \$2 billion in military aid to Peshawar near the Khyber Pass, where it could be carried through the hills on horses and mules to the Afghan guerrillas.¹⁹

To translate Brzezinski's grand Afghan strategy into boots on the ground, the CIA sent veteran operative Howard Hart to serve as its man on the spot in Pakistan. As a member of an expatriate family living in Manila that was confined during Japan's wartime occupation of the Philippines, Hart had acquired an idealized view of America when, at age five in 1945, a US paratrooper carried him to safety from an internment camp, saying: “Don't worry kid, you're going home.” After earning degrees in Asian Studies at the University of Arizona, Hart joined the CIA in 1966. During Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, he was assigned to exfiltrate the shah's SAVAK intelligence assets—a mission that once required him to gun down two Iranian policemen with a 9-mm pistol when he was caught during a late-night document drop. In May 1981, he accepted the Pakistan posting with broad orders to “go raise hell” in Afghanistan, allowing him ample autonomy to put his individual imprint on the CIA's secret war. As he later recalled: “I was the first chief of station ever sent abroad with this wonderful order: ‘Go kill Soviet soldiers.’ Imagine! I loved it.”²⁰

Instead of staying safe inside the Islamabad embassy and letting Pakistan's intelligence service run the secret war, Hart drove up the Grand Trunk Road alone to Peshawar near the border, where he often met his Afghan assets in the city's bazaar and later accompanied them into Afghanistan. Convinced that the Afghan *mujahedin* “were perhaps the most dangerous guerrilla fighters in the world,” he used his small initial budget

of \$30 million annually to buy them British bolt-action .303 Enfield rifles and cheap RPG-7s (rocket-propelled grenades) that still had enough punch to stop a tank. As his funding grew to \$200 million by 1984, Hart upgraded his arsenal to include AK-47 assault rifles, heavy machine guns, and 60-mm mortars. Given a “long leash” by the CIA, Hart served as its de facto “field marshal” for three years, working effectively with the head of Pakistan’s intelligence and forming a close bond with a young *mujahedin* commander, Abdul Haq, who became his chief intermediary for arms deliveries. Although he encouraged the rebels to fight in small, hundred-man units, he did not try to dictate the direction of their operations. By the time Hart returned home in 1984, he had forged the infrastructure for a resilient Afghan resistance with an estimated four hundred thousand guerrillas who had already destroyed four hundred Soviet aircraft and 2,750 armored vehicles.²¹ Although they had proven themselves formidable fighters, the *mujahedin* still lacked the firepower needed to push the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

Beneath Brzezinski’s grand strategy and Hart’s heroics, there was a grittier reality taking shape on the ground in Afghanistan. While the *mujahedin* commanders welcomed the CIA’s arms, they soon turned to opium trafficking for extra funds to sustain the farming families that provided their recruits. As a result, the CIA’s capacity to support the Afghan *mujahedin* fighters for a full decade against the Soviets rested on a synergy between its secret war and the region’s opium traffic.

As the CIA intervention entered its sixth year in 1986, a *New York Times* reporter traveling through southern Afghanistan was struck by the spreading poppy fields and quoted one rebel leader saying: “We must grow and sell opium to fight our holy war against the Russian nonbelievers.” Caravans carrying CIA arms into Afghanistan often returned to Pakistan loaded with opium—sometimes, reported the *New York Times*, “with the assent of Pakistani or American intelligence officers who supported the resistance.”²² During that decade-long conflict, Afghanistan’s opium harvest soared from just a hundred tons annually in 1979 to two thousand tons by 1990.²³ To process the raw opium into heroin, Afghan warlords and Pakistani traffickers opened illicit laboratories inside Pakistan’s borderlands that, by 1984, supplied 60 percent of US demand and a staggering 80 percent of the European market.²⁴ In Pakistan itself, the number of heroin addicts surged

from near zero in 1979 to 1.3 million by 1985, making it the world's most addicted nation.²⁵

By 1988, there were an estimated one hundred to two hundred heroin refineries based around the Khyber Pass inside Pakistan and operating under the purview of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). Elsewhere along the border, the *Washington Post* reported that "Hekmatyar commanders close to ISI run laboratories in southwestern Pakistan." The director of the CIA operation, Charles Cogan, later spoke frankly about the Agency's priorities, saying: "We didn't really have the resources or the time to devote to an investigation of the drug trade. I don't think that we need to apologize for this. . . . There was fallout in term of drugs, yes. But the main objective was accomplished. The Soviets left Afghanistan."²⁶

Overall, the first years of that secret war damaged but did not deter Soviet forces from their occupation. The CIA was, however, encouraged by the leader of the ethnic Tajik rebels, Ahmed Shah Massoud, who proved himself the most skilled of *mujahedin* commanders by staging several successful offensives in 1981–82 against the Soviets. Reflecting that optimism, in 1984 CIA director William Casey told his colleagues, "Here is the beauty of the Afghan operation. . . . We don't make it our war. The *mujahedin* have all the motivation they need. All we have to do is to give them help, only more of it."²⁷

THE ESCALATION OF COVERT WARFARE

As US funding for the *mujahedin* guerrillas grew tenfold from \$60 million in 1981 to \$630 million by 1987, Hart's individual heroics gave way to a far more bureaucratized operation. While the secret war segued into a more aggressive phase in 1985, the Americans increased their arms shipments and tried to exercise greater control. But the Pakistanis did their best to resist such an intrusion. After taking charge of the ISI's Afghan Bureau in 1983, Pakistani general Mohammad Yousaf experienced this American bureaucratization firsthand from what he called the "ceaseless stream of CIA-sponsored visitors from Washington" who exhibited a "total ignorance of military logistics" and an "infuriating inability to grasp the basic elements of how the guerrilla war was being fought." Consequently, the Pakistanis insisted that "no Americans ever become involved with the

distribution of funds or arms.” In addition, frustrated by the infighting among local Afghan commanders that the CIA had long tolerated, the Pakistanis imposed a seven-man leadership on the *mujahedin* movement in 1984 and tried to introduce military discipline by setting up camps that trained eighty thousand fighters. While such policies undoubtedly improved combat performance, they also skewed the US aid toward leaders like Hekmatyar, whose militant Islam the ISI preferred.²⁸

In a test of wills, both Moscow and Washington began to escalate their commitment to the conflict. After taking office as Soviet leader in March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev tried to deal with the Afghan quagmire by giving his generals a year to devise a winning strategy. Expanding its budget for air operations, the Red Army then deployed one weapon the guerrillas could not match—lumbering Mi-24 helicopters with an armored fuselage impervious to small arms fire. In response, Washington officials wrangled for months over the delivery of heat-seeking Stinger missiles to the rebels.²⁹

Ignoring his advisers’ concern about the multiple dangers of their delivery in a Cold War context, Reagan unilaterally overruled his National Security Council and authorized shipment of the Stingers. On the first day of their deployment, September 25, 1986, these lethal shoulder-fired missiles destroyed three Soviet Mi-24 helicopters. In the last two years of the war, they scored a 79 percent success rate, bringing down 269 Soviet aircraft and forcing them to fly at higher altitudes where they proved much less effective. By then, moreover, the legend of an Arab jihadist named Osama bin Laden had been born in battles captured by video camera, for which he was idolized by many Arabs and Afghans. As the war turned against the Soviets in 1986, Moscow deposed the diffident Afghan leader Babrak Karmal, replacing him with the ruthless head of the KGB-trained secret police, Mohammad Najibullah, who seemed more capable of fighting the war on his own.³⁰

To stanch what he had called the “bleeding wound” of Afghanistan, in November 1986 Gorbachev told the Soviet Politburo: “We got ourselves into this mess—we did not calculate it right and exposed ourselves in all aspects. . . . But now . . . we’ve got to get out of this mess!” To that, the chief of the Red Army’s general staff, Sergei Akhromeyev, replied: “After seven years in Afghanistan, there is not one square kilometer left untouched by the boot of a Soviet soldier. But as soon as they leave a place, the enemy returns. . . . We have lost the battle for the Afghan people.” By then, the

Soviets had also lost 745 aircraft, 995 armored vehicles, and 15,000 troops, all at an unsustainable cost of \$96 billion.³¹

At a summit meeting in Washington in late 1987, Gorbachev surprised Reagan by announcing that the Red Army would withdraw from Afghanistan within twelve months. As a result, at the talks for settlement of the Afghan War in April 1988, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed peace agreements, while Secretary of State George Shultz and Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze concluded a parallel accord for Soviet withdrawal. However, Washington refused to stop arming the *mujahedin* and the final settlement was left to the Afghans—rendering the resolution partial at best.³²

More broadly, the Afghan withdrawal proved to be part of Gorbachev's sudden shift in Soviet foreign policy to wind down the Third World socialist offensive Moscow had launched around 1970. By the mid-1980s, he had tired of providing costly military aid to corrupt clients and began pulling back from South Yemen, which had plunged into civil war; from Ethiopia, despite its desperate pleas for help against Eritrean guerrillas; and from Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, encouraging him to enter peace talks with the CIA-backed Contras.³³

When the last Red Army tanks crossed the Friendship Bridge out of Afghanistan and into the Soviet Union in February 1989, that retreat in defeat became what a former Soviet foreign minister termed “the last nail in the coffin of the Soviet Union.” By then, the Red Army had suffered both heavy casualties and a serious demoralization that would weaken Moscow's ability to intervene when Eastern Europe's “autumn revolutions” erupted just nine months later.³⁴ Whether causal or coincidental, Brzezinski's geopolitical strategy of attacking the Soviet Union in Central Asia would indeed be followed by Eastern Europe breaking free from Moscow's grip.

Only weeks after the Red Army's retreat, however, the limits of the CIA's covert operations were exposed in the *mujahedin*'s abortive attack on the city of Jalalabad. After pressuring the fractious Afghan leaders into forming a rebel government, Pakistan's ISI decided they also needed to establish an interim capital inside Afghanistan as a springboard for their coming capture of Kabul from the surviving Soviet client state. At a meeting in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, the US ambassador Robert Oakley and senior Pakistani officials picked Jalalabad, a well-defended Afghan city an hour's drive from the Pakistan border, as the target for that

campaign. Significantly, not a single Afghan pushed for Jalalabad. Not surprisingly, the operation soon became a debacle, with bickering commanders leading ill-trained Afghan teenagers into minefields, rocket barrages, and air attacks. During weeks of fighting in the spring of 1989, the communist garrison at Jalalabad showed surprising determination, slaughtering thousands of *mujahedin* fighters and forcing them to retreat, defeated and humiliated.³⁵

THE AFTERMATH OF COVERT WARFARE

As the covert war wound into its final phase between 1989 and 1992, Washington ignored the long-term needs of that ravaged land and let the CIA keep funding its Afghan clients for fighting that soon segued into a civil war. After investing \$2 billion in the country's destruction, Washington refused to pay anything for its reconstruction—leaving Afghanistan with 1.5 million dead, 5 million refugees, a ravaged economy, and warlords primed to struggle for power. In the meantime, international aid for refugees and famine relief had plunged from \$87 million at the height of the covert war in 1981 to only \$13 million in 2000, even though the country was then suffering a devastating drought.³⁶

Without any means to resolve the past or plan the future, the Afghan rebels, armed with opium profits, plunged into a protracted civil war. More broadly, the covert war of the 1980s and the civil war of the 1990s would transform Afghanistan into a country with an opium monocrop—transferring much of its economy to drug traffickers and complicating any attempt at nation-building. A decade later, the *New York Times* would condemn Washington's decision to abandon Afghanistan as “a catastrophic mistake.” But at the time, few American officials paid any real attention to that ruined Cold War battleground.³⁷

For three years following the Soviet retreat in 1989, the CIA and Pakistan's ISI backed their asset Hekmatyar as he tried to capture Kabul, with the Agency providing him another \$200 million and the Pakistanis delivering arms and artillery. Instead, the skilled guerrilla fighter Ahmed Shah Massoud conquered Kabul in 1992, forcing the Soviet client president Najibullah to seek refuge in the UN compound there. As Massoud struggled to form a coalition government of contentious *mujahedin* commanders,

Hekmatyar's forces surrounded the capital and, armed by the ISI, shelled the city for months on end, slaughtering some fifty thousand of its residents.³⁸

After Hekmatyar failed to take the capital, Pakistan's intelligence agency, now acting on its own, formed a new force called the Taliban from the *madrasah* students crowded into refugee camps in its North-West Frontier Province. Instead of advancing in conventional military fashion, the Taliban dispatched Muslim mullahs to negotiate the surrender of local warlords, occupying the southern city of Kandahar in November 1994 and finally capturing Kabul in September 1996. They marked that victory by hanging ex-president Najibullah's body from a light pole. Desperate for tax revenues and denied any significant foreign aid, the Taliban government legalized opium production and heroin refining, doubling the poppy harvest to 4,600 tons within three years and supplying 75 percent of world heroin demand.³⁹

The CIA's intervention had also left behind a young Saudi militant named Osama bin Laden who founded a group called al-Qaeda during the war against the Soviets. He was now seeking a new enemy for what became a *jihad*, or holy war against the West—a development that would, within a decade, roil Washington's post-Cold War hegemony.

THE COLD WAR LEGACY

For the Soviet Union, Afghanistan was indeed a graveyard of empire. Despite costly military operations that continued for a decade, 1979 to 1989, Moscow had not only failed to create a stable communist client state but also suffered a demoralizing defeat that hastened the breakup of the Soviet empire. Asked in 1998 about the consequences of Washington's covert intervention in Afghanistan, Brzezinski replied by celebrating its impact on the Cold War while dismissing the importance of Islamic fundamentalism. "What is most important to the history of the world?" he asked. "The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?"⁴⁰

By drawing the Red Army into what he called "the Afghan trap" for a slow bleed of men, material, and morale, Brzezinski may well have devised

a geopolitical strategy for liberating Eastern Europe and precipitating the collapse of the Soviet Union. After all, the eruption of mass uprisings across Eastern Europe, just nine months after the Red Army's withdrawal from Afghanistan, would topple the communist client states that had long served Soviet control over the region. In a striking contrast to uprisings in Budapest in 1956 or Prague in 1968, Red Army garrisons were unable or unwilling to check the latest protests. Over the next two years as Soviet republics from Lithuania to Georgia also proved restive, the dispatch of Soviet troops for inept interventions would fail to quell dissent and instead sparked a massive protest in Moscow against their use.

Although the CIA had ended its covert Afghan intervention in 1992, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the doubling of poppy cultivation there would twist the country's politics into a Gordian knot of social complexity that would defy any of Washington's later nation-building efforts when it returned to the country after September 2001. And when, like the Soviets, the Americans finally withdrew in 2021, Afghanistan would represent a debacle just as searing as the Soviet defeat, doing palpable damage to the aura of US global power.

PART FOUR

CLOSE OF THE COLD WAR



Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Vic Raphael celebrates five decades of government service in the US Army and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Washington, DC, April 6, 2022. (Credit: US State Department).

CHAPTER 15

COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE

On the evening of December 25, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on Russian television to announce the dissolution of the Soviet Union. “Dear fellow countrymen,” he began, “I hereby discontinue my activities at the post of President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.” Looking back over the six years of his leadership, he continued: “This country was suffocating in the shackles of the bureaucratic command system. . . . We had to change everything radically. . . . We’re now living in a new world. An end has been put to the Cold War and to the arms race, as well as to the mad militarization of the country, which has crippled our economy, public attitudes, and morals.”¹

Reflecting the momentous import of that message, just a few hours later President George H. W. Bush broke into his country’s Christmas day celebrations for a triumphal televised address. “For over 40 years,” he explained, “the United States led the West in the struggle against Communism and the threat it posed to our most precious values. This struggle shaped the lives of all Americans. It forced all nations to live under the specter of nuclear destruction. That confrontation is now over.” With a somber tone and unsmiling gaze, he added: “The Soviet Union itself is no more. . . . Every American can take pride in this victory.” Then he concluded with a surprising tribute: “I’d like to express, on behalf of the American people, my gratitude to Mikhail Gorbachev . . . for his intellect, vision and courage. . . . His policies permitted the peoples of Russia and the other republics to cast aside decades of oppression and establish the foundations of freedom.”²

Yet Gorbachev was no more the architect of that historic change than Bush himself. For the previous six years, a chain reaction of urban uprisings

had challenged autocratic governments on both sides of the Iron Curtain, producing a global eruption of mass protests that, with stunning speed, ended the Cold War. With their nuclear arsenals, massive militaries, and enormous economies, Moscow and Washington had long controlled the conduct of the Cold War through a rigid bipolar division and bloody regional wars that roiled the planet, killing some twenty million people.³ But starting in 1986, mass protest movements in the capitals of client states far from Moscow or Washington unleashed powerful political forces that the superpowers simply could not control, encouraging diplomatic initiatives and thereby catalyzing an end to the conflict. These mass mobilizations were generally spontaneous, largely leaderless, and surprisingly nonviolent—allowing ordinary citizens to take history into their hands and decide their nation’s destiny. If there was ever a time when world history was made from the bottom up and outside in, this was it.

Throughout most of the Cold War, the only way to overthrow a dictatorship had been the Maoist model of surrounding the cities with guerrillas and fighting for power through long years of armed struggle. In February 1986, however, Filipinos found that by mobilizing a million middle-class demonstrators for a few days of peaceful protests in their capital Manila, they could send even an entrenched dictator fleeing into exile. Transmitted by geostationary satellites and broadcast around the world by the BBC, CNN, and countless other national networks, Manila’s “people power” revolution became a real-time television drama that would inspire parallel uprisings across the vast Eurasian landmass—from Seoul, Bangkok, Beijing, and Rangoon all the way to Berlin, Bucharest, and Prague.⁴ In most of those cities, mass rallies achieved maximum political change with a minimal loss of life. But when militaries did open fire, as in Beijing and Rangoon, there would be considerable bloodshed and usually a dismal political outcome.

From the start of the Cold War in the late 1940s, both Moscow and Washington had controlled their respective satellite states by installing compliant autocrats in presidential palaces—whether communist apparatchiks behind the Iron Curtain or military dictators in the “Free World.” Not only did that eruption of dissent at the edges of those empires in Europe and Asia topple the superpowers’ client states, but it also unleashed a worldwide wave of democratization that swept across Latin America, replacing its many military dictatorships with democratic

elections.⁵ Through it all, world leaders in London, Moscow, Paris, and Washington sat in their offices watching those events unfold on television as countless millions of ordinary citizens rallied, marched, shouted, and sang—creating the greatest eruption of mass political protest in human history and thereby catalyzing the end of the Cold War.

To explore the political dynamics of that global democratic revolution, it is necessary to march across the breadth of Eurasia, beginning with that first “people power” revolution in the Philippines, and follow its reverberations to Eastern Europe.

PEOPLE POWER IN THE PHILIPPINES

By the mid-1980s, forty years of the Cold War had brought authoritarian rule to most of Asia—with communist regimes in China, Indochina, and North Korea and military dictatorships in Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. In the region’s first break with that autocratic trend, the Philippines experienced an abortive coup that soon segued into a mass uprising.

After declaring martial law in 1972 with Washington’s tacit assent, President Ferdinand Marcos’s fourteen years of misrule plunged the country into an economic crisis that revived a political opposition previously almost erased by military repression. Marcos had practiced a “crony capitalism,” awarding his allies a total of \$2.75 billion in bailouts for their collapsing corporations. After his fall, the government would recover nearly \$4 billion of his plundered assets.⁶

With her love of luxury, First Lady Imelda Marcos had made the invisible plunder visible to ordinary Filipinos. As governor of Metro Manila, she could indulge what *Fortune* magazine called “her insatiable appetite for expensive showpieces,” including a \$13 million Coconut Palace that sat empty and her cavernous Film Center that collapsed in 1981, killing an estimated 169 workers. As Minister of Human Settlements, she presided over a feeding program that managed to overlook the mass starvation of children in the central Philippines—producing horrific photos of emaciated infants in the national press.⁷

As the opposition grew in the years before his downfall, Marcos made military terror an instrument of state power—with 70,000 Filipinos arrested,

35,000 tortured, and 3,257 killed, a carnage comparable to the 3,065 extrajudicial deaths under General Pinochet in Chile.⁸ With the economic crisis worsening and opposition growing, Marcos tried to recover legitimacy by ending martial law in 1981, running for president, and, with Washington's support, inaugurating what he called a "New Republic."⁹

Sensing that Marcos's power was weakening, exiled opposition leader Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino decided to return home in August 1983, where he was promptly shot in the head by security officers as soon as he landed at Manila Airport, sparking months of demonstrations to honor a "martyr" in that very Catholic country.¹⁰ As the crisis continued and US pressure for reform mounted, Marcos sought to renew his mandate with yet another election in 1986. While the political opposition united behind the martyr's widow, Corazon Aquino, his own carefully curated reputation as a battle-tested war hero suffered a setback when the *New York Times* published an exposé, based on documents I found in the course of my research at the US National Archives, that discredited those claims to wartime heroism. On election day—February 7, 1986—there were simply too many anti-Marcos votes for the regime to overcome without the kind of blatant vote-stealing that inspired mass protests.¹¹

Sensing an opportunity to seize power, Marcos's ambitious defense minister, Juan Ponce Enrile, began plotting a coup. His surrogate was the commander of his own security squad, Lieutenant Colonel Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan, who had formed a dissident military faction he called the Reform the Armed Forces Movement, or RAM. Their plans soon leaked to the local CIA station, which passed the names of the RAM plotters on to Marcos's security chief. He in turn began planning a preemptive strike to crush the coup planners.¹²

Just a few days before their date to launch the coup, RAM's leaders received an urgent call from the assistant US military attaché, Major Vic Raphael, who had developed friendships with the colonels through golf games while he was monitoring their movement. Although a career intelligence officer, the major's mission of infiltrating RAM gave him sufficient freedom from the embassy's strictures to become Washington's man on the spot in Manila. According to the colonels, Raphael revealed the details of what the CIA had learned, convincing them that their coup plans had indeed been "blown." But the major also delivered a message that "the U.S. government has told President Marcos not to persecute RAM."

Interpreting his message to mean “the U.S. is betting on all the horses,” the RAM colonels decided to persist with their plotting. Reinforcing the accuracy of their assessment, in the week before the coup the head of the CIA’s station, Norbert Garrett, told Marcos’s security chief to “lay off the RAM guys,” while only days later also warning him to strengthen presidential protection at Malacañang Palace.¹³

With his coup plan now compromised, Minister Enrile quickly opted for an open mutiny against Marcos. As the world’s television cameras watched, Manila’s “people power” uprising became a telenovela played out on the eight-lane highway, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, that runs between Manila’s main military bases, Camp Crame and Camp Aguinaldo. On day one—February 22, 1986—three hundred rebel troops occupied those two military cantonments. Summoned by a radio broadcast from Manila’s Catholic cardinal, massive crowds gathered to protect the camps. When Marcos’s Marines were finally positioned to attack, their commander, wary of the crowd’s enormous size, disobeyed the president’s order to fire. After just four days of mass protests, Marcos flew into exile in Hawaii.¹⁴

Although overlooked by TV coverage that focused on the visible drama of those vast throngs, the Philippine military’s refusal to fire was nonetheless a critical factor in the crowd’s ability to end authoritarian rule—a lesson that would be repeated, both tragically at Beijing and triumphantly at Berlin, as people power spread around the rim of Eurasia. Also concealed from the television cameras, Washington had deftly played both sides to preserve its strategic Philippine bases at Subic Bay and Clark Field.

As for the man on the spot, Major Raphael’s rescue of the RAM rebels from preemptive arrest arguably allowed “people power” to play out as it did, setting off a chain reaction of similar mass protests that helped end the Cold War, and thus making him a significant historical actor. More immediately, however, his ties to the RAM rebels sparked heated public controversy in Manila when, within a year, he was accused of trying to protect his “close personal friend” Honasan during a coup attempt the colonel led against the new democratic government. Not only did that diplomatic incident force Major Raphael’s recall, but it also suggested that the conditions that had long allowed such men on the spot to act with autonomy and authority were fast fading, not only in the Philippines but in much of the so-called Third World. Despite that diplomatic incident,

Raphael's fifty-year intelligence career would carry him to senior positions in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. There, in 2006, I witnessed his steely discipline seated directly opposite him for several hours at an ambassadorial briefing. He did not show a flicker of recognition, even though I had been the first, back in 1986, to reveal his covert role in that anti-Marcos coup.¹⁵

MASSACRE IN MYANMAR

Among Southeast Asia's four urban uprisings in Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, only the 1988 demonstrations in Rangoon against Burma's military regime failed so completely that it would be another quarter-century before there was any further progress toward democracy there. By the late 1980s, General Ne Win had ruled as Burma's strongman for twenty-six years, the country's economy was stagnant, and a new generation of students was growing restless.¹⁶

Between March and June 1988, students and middle-class leaders in Rangoon launched a "democracy movement" that brought down heavy military repression on them. Despite the declaration of martial law, Rangoon erupted in more student demonstrations in August. This time the military opened fire, killing over a thousand young people.¹⁷ On September 18, 1988, General Ne Win formed a powerful junta called the State Law & Order Restoration Council. When thousands of protesters marched in the streets that night, the military opened fire with machine guns, killing hundreds of them. As arrests and shootings mounted, student activists fled Rangoon for the hills along the Thai border, where they sought refuge with ethnic rebels.¹⁸

In the aftermath of the massacre, the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the national hero Aung San, who had won independence from the British, emerged to lead the democracy movement. In the May 1990 elections that the military held in an attempt to recover legitimacy, Aung San Suu Kyi led a united opposition in winning 82 percent of the parliamentary seats. But the junta simply arrested her and imposed martial rule again. In 1991, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which provided some protection during her twenty years of periodic house arrest until she could resume her leadership in Burma's ongoing struggle for

democracy.¹⁹ Despite those months of mass demonstrations and a stinging repudiation at the ballot box, Burma's military would cling to power for decades to come and even now, at this writing, is fighting an armed revolt by pro-democracy forces.

TRAGEDY IN TIANANMEN SQUARE

By 1989, the democratic ferment sweeping Asia and Europe sparked a surprisingly strong pro-democracy movement among students in Beijing, capital of the rising communist superpower, the People's Republic of China. After two decades of disastrous rule under Mao Zedong, marked by mass starvation during his Great Leap Forward movement (1958–62) and the bloody chaos of his cultural revolution in the 1960s, the Chinese Communist Party had introduced market reforms in the 1980s.

When the architect of those reforms, former Communist Party secretary-general Hu Yaobang, died of a heart attack in April 1989, university students marched to Tiananmen Square in Beijing to place a wreath in his honor near the Great Hall of the People. Within days, some hundred thousand students were marching through the streets calling for democracy, while similar demonstrations spread to some four hundred cities across China.²⁰

After four weeks of sustained protests, the State Council declared martial law on May 20 and sent three hundred thousand army troops streaming toward Beijing. At 10:00 p.m. on June 3, sporadic fighting broke out as soldiers moved toward Tiananmen Square from all directions. The demonstrators blocked the roads with buses and threw Molotov cocktails at troops, who responded with automatic weapons fire. Enforcing the regime's orders, soldiers persisted in their advance and cleared that vast square of protesters by dawn—though a lone pedestrian, “the Tank Man,” blocked the path of oncoming tanks until he, too, stepped aside.²¹

In the aftermath, the government arrested many of the demonstrators and reversed a political liberalization movement, reaffirming the authority of the Communist Party and imposing strict controls on free speech that persist to this day.

EASTERN EUROPE'S AUTUMN REVOLUTIONS

By the early 1980s, Europeans on both sides of the Iron Curtain were tiring of the Cold War's endless, escalating tensions, and responded with an extraordinary decade of mass protests that helped change the course of world history. As Moscow and Washington deployed intermediate-range missiles aimed at the continent's main cities, the citizens of Western Europe mobilized, with a million marching in October 1981 and, two years later, three million more filling European streets to demand nuclear disarmament—later prompting the superpowers to ban those missiles.²²

In 1985 and 1986, moreover, the West's tacit Cold War alliance with South Africa's apartheid regime sparked sustained protests with up to 250,000 people marching in cities across the United Kingdom. At the close of this remarkable decade, the “autumn revolutions” of 1989 in Eastern Europe inspired massive demonstrations that overthrew communist governments in six Soviet satellite states and inspired similar mass protests inside the Soviet Union itself, which had a profound impact on the course of the Cold War. Visiting Prague in the midst of the region's 1989 autumn revolutions, the British historian Timothy Garton Ash noted the surprising pace of communism's collapse, saying: “In Poland it took ten years, in Hungary ten months, in East Germany ten weeks: perhaps in Czechoslovakia it will take ten days!”²³ Indeed, that quip proved not only an accurate prediction for both Czechoslovakia and Romania, but aptly summarized a process that involved nothing less than the decolonization of the Soviet empire.

This wave of mass resistance that swept across Eastern Europe had started in 1978 when the archbishop of Krakow, Poland, became Pope John Paul II and returned home for a nine-day visit, giving thirty sermons before vast crowds and urging his countrymen to be courageous.²⁴ Inspired by this spiritual ferment and angered by rising prices, in 1980 an electrician named Lech Wałęsa formed an unauthorized union that he called Solidarity to lead strikes by seventeen thousand workers at the massive Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. By March 1981, that local action had swelled into a nationwide strike by twelve million workers that paralyzed Poland. Boggled down by its ongoing military occupation of Afghanistan and reluctant to intervene, Moscow pressured Poland's communist leaders to suppress the dissent. So General Wojciech Jaruzelski, a hard-liner who became first secretary of the

Communist Party in October 1981, quickly declared martial law, arresting about five thousand Solidarity leaders, including Wałęsa.²⁵

After slowing rebuilding, Solidarity would escalate its confrontation with the communist state for the next seven years, culminating in months of tumultuous strikes and demonstrations in 1988. No longer capable of blanket repression, the communist government held legislative elections in June 1989, with Solidarity winning all the open seats in the lower house and ninety-nine out of a hundred seats in the Senate. In December 1989, Wałęsa won a presidential election to become the country's first non-communist leader in forty-five years.²⁶

Washington held its breath waiting for a move by the Red Army, which had been badly battered by its disastrous ten-year occupation of Afghanistan. But Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced that “any attempts to limit the sovereignty of states—including friends and allies, or anyone else—are impermissible.”²⁷ With Moscow's tacit assent, President Wałęsa plunged into serious reforms that led to the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the sale of state-owned industries. Eventually, Poland would be integrated into Europe as a member of both NATO and the European Union.

HUNGARY'S TEN-MONTH TRANSITION

Unlike Poland's protracted drama, the end of communism in Hungary was, ironically, spawned by factional rivalries within the ruling Communist Party. In January 1989, after Moscow's long-serving communist ally, János Kádár, had been forced from power, Hungary's parliament adopted a “democracy package”—including freedom of the press, new electoral procedures, and a revised constitution. When the country's National Day celebrations erupted into unauthorized mass demonstrations on March 15, the Communist Party agreed to open protracted negotiations with half a dozen opposition groups.²⁸

In response to the opposition's demands, Hungary opened the first crack in the Iron Curtain on May 2 when its foreign minister, with Gorbachev's consent, began removing the border fence that had been Hungary's portion of that iconic barrier. On June 27, the foreign ministers of Austria and Hungary staged a photo-op while cutting through the barbed wire. Now that the border with neutral Austria was open, a flood of East German

holidaymakers began escaping through Hungary into the West.²⁹ That June, a massive crowd of 250,000 attended an emotional hero's burial in the largest square in the Hungarian capital of Budapest for Imre Nagy, the leader of the 1956 Hungarian uprising against the Soviet presence, who had been executed and previously buried in an unmarked grave.³⁰ By its sheer size and symbolism, that outpouring of public emotion signaled an end to any public support for communist rule.

That October, the Communist Party became the Hungarian Socialist Party, and parliament voted to dissolve the People's Republic of Hungary, ending communist rule there. Six months later, the Soviet military occupation of Hungary, which had started in 1945, ended as the last Red Army troops returned to Russia.³¹

EAST GERMANY'S TEN WEEKS TO FREEDOM

For forty years, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany ruled East Germany with the backing of the Stasi, a secret police force notorious for its summary executions and pervasive surveillance of citizens through spies in almost every apartment building, factory, and school. At its peak, the Stasi had some 274,000 employees, about 2.5 percent of the working population, to surveil a society of sixteen million people.³²

Despite such omnipresent surveillance, the Evangelical Lutheran Church tried to counter the influence of the state's military-style youth programs, which socialized teenagers for a war-oriented society.³³ In that political context, the Lutheran Church's call for "Peace Without Arms" would prove deeply subversive. The peace movement also tried to foster critical thinking through years of church-based "conscientization" of one individual by another, slowly and silently eroding the state's authority and, eventually, its legitimacy. Finally, in late 1989, rising mass protest and fading government control culminated in the breaching of the Berlin Wall that had separated East and West Germany for nearly thirty years.³⁴

The unraveling of East Germany started in October 1989 when Soviet leader Gorbachev visited East Berlin to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Despite Gorbachev's strong warning not to use force, the local police launched a brutal crackdown on protests.³⁵ Two days later, the regular Monday

demonstrations led by the St. Nicholas Lutheran Church in Leipzig attracted seventy thousand people. Six thousand riot police mobilized to quash that peaceful protest, yet a bloody crackdown was averted when an ad hoc citizen's committee, led by famed symphony conductor Kurt Masur, joined the local communist leaders in broadcasting an appeal for peace over loudspeakers across the city. As the demonstrations spread around the country, the GDR's longtime communist leader, Erich Honecker, suddenly resigned on October 18, sparking even larger protests. In the weeks that followed, the police stood aside as "peace prayer" rallies sponsored by the church in Leipzig and neighboring cities grew from seventy thousand, to three hundred thousand, and then to five hundred thousand.³⁶

By November, thousands of East Germans began crossing the country's border into Czechoslovakia and Hungary, forcing the GDR to announce a new travel policy. At a press conference in East Berlin on November 9, the head of the city's Communist Party, Günter Schabowski, told television reporters that the government's new policy would allow travel to West Berlin. Asked when the policy would take effect, the flustered bureaucrat replied, "Immediately, right away." During the 10:30 nightly news on a West German network widely watched in East Berlin, anchorman Hanns Friedrichs declared that "this ninth of November is a historic day," because East Germany "has announced that, starting immediately, its borders are open to everyone." Huge crowds of East Germans quickly formed at the Berlin Wall's six checkpoints. Disconcerted by their persistence, a Stasi officer at the Bornholmer Strasse crossing opened the gates and suddenly, tens of thousands of protesters surged into West Berlin, where citizens greeted them with flowers and champagne.³⁷

Within a year, the Berlin Wall, the Cold War's ultimate symbol, had disappeared. After President Bush overcame resistance from Britain, France, and the Soviet Union about the reunification of their historic enemy, East Germany merged with West Germany on October 3, 1990, and that now unified nation became a full member of NATO.³⁸

CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S TEN-DAY WALK TO DEMOCRACY

While Poland's autumn revolution was a working-class movement, Czechoslovakia's was largely an intellectual revolt led by Prague's creative

classes. More than any other nation in Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia had a large intelligentsia of artists, filmmakers, musicians, and writers. Chafing under twenty years of repressive communist rule, Czechoslovakia experienced its first eruption of intellectual dissent during the famous “Prague Spring” of 1968. After a relaxation of communist controls, the moderate Communist Party leader Alexander Dubček launched a limited liberalization. Citizens took Dubček’s reforms literally, interpreting the new opening as a signal from the top that dissent was now allowed. But that Prague Spring of political ferment was quickly crushed when Soviet tanks rolled into the city and Dubček was ousted from power.³⁹

Although the UN Security Council discussed these events, once again the Western bloc failed to take action and thus confirmed its tacit acceptance of the Soviet imperium in Eastern Europe. With almost all mobile US forces concentrated in Vietnam, Washington chose to ignore the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and focus instead on its ongoing détente with Moscow. As the sad denouement of the Prague Spring indicated so clearly, the leaders of the Eastern Europe’s younger activist generation could not rely on the West and would be forced to win their own freedom through sustained political mobilization.

As that warm Prague Spring became a very cold winter, Czechoslovakia suddenly went from being the most liberal to the most conservative of the Soviet satellite states. Those who had participated in anti-Soviet protests soon found that they could not publish books, stage plays, produce films, or exhibit their artwork. Among them was an absurdist playwright named Václav Havel who had provided an on-air narrative for Radio Free Czechoslovakia during the 1968 Soviet invasion—activism punished by a complete ban from the stage that freed him for even greater levels of activism.⁴⁰

In 1976, when the police raided a concert by the rock group “The Plastic People of the Universe,” who sang mindless lyrics to dissonant music, Havel and his friends organized a protest group focused on civil liberties later known as Charter 77. Jailed repeatedly from 1979 to 1983, Havel became a symbol of resistance to communist rule.⁴¹

After his release from prison in 1983, Havel led Charter 77 in launching demonstrations that culminated in a march by fifteen thousand people on International Students Day, November 17, 1989. That protest prompted a brutal secret-police attack that, two days later, inspired Havel to lead a

merger of a dozen opposition groups into a political coalition called the Civic Forum. As their daily demonstrations grew from 200,000 to 400,000 and then an extraordinary 750,000, the communist leadership was paralyzed. Through both public protests and private meetings, Havel finally persuaded the Communist Party to announce, on November 28, that it was giving up power. Witnessing this extraordinary ten-day transition to democracy, historian Timothy Garton Ash was struck by “the speed, the improvisation, the merriness, and the absolutely central role of Václav Havel, who was at once director, playwright, stage-manager, and leading actor in this, his greatest play.”⁴²

In December 1989, the country’s first non-communist parliament since 1948 elected Havel as president. During his fifteen-year term, he would play a central role in forming a post-Cold War Europe—negotiating the withdrawal of the Red Army from his country, dissolving the Warsaw Pact, and helping change NATO from an anti-Soviet alliance into a European security organization.⁴³

Although events in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia were tumultuous, they paled before the turmoil of the transition in the Balkans, where Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia experienced violence in various forms.

TEN BLOODY DAYS IN ROMANIA

In marked contrast to the peaceful protests in Berlin and Prague, Romania’s transition from communist rule was marked by a short burst of intense violence. As general secretary of the Communist Party from 1965 until 1989, Nicolae Ceaușescu ruled Romania with a mix of mass rallies and a mailed fist—propagating a cult of personality, presiding over an economy sinking into ever-deepening poverty, and deploying his Securitate secret police to crush dissent.

The spark for a successful uprising against the regime was struck at the town of Timisoara on December 17, 1989, when protesters tried to prevent police from arresting a Protestant pastor known for his critical sermons. Ceaușescu ordered his defense minister, General Vasile Milea, to “kill the hooligans” while his wife Elena commanded, “You should shoot them so they fall”—orders that produced sixty dead and many wounded. When

rioting and bloody repression spread to the capital, Bucharest, on December 21, Ceaușescu tried to regain control with another of his many mass rallies at University Square, hoping to charm the crowd with his charisma. About eight minutes into his speech, however, cheering by the one hundred thousand people present turned to jeering that invoked the recent massacre with shouts of “Timisoara!” To recover some momentary order, Ceaușescu was forced to shout “Hello!” repeatedly into the microphone while his wife yelled “Silence!,” regaining control of the crowd long enough to promise a 10 percent wage increase for all workers. An evening broadcast of the rally on national television showed images of a panicky Ceaușescu yelling, “Be quiet!”—sparking riots that night in Bucharest.⁴⁴

Needing a scapegoat, Ceaușescu had the Securitate arrest Defense Minister Milea, which quickly branded the general a “traitor” and announced that he had “committed suicide.” At that moment, military commanders broke with the regime and their troops began joining the demonstrators.⁴⁵ The next day, December 22, Ceaușescu convened another mass rally at University Square. This time, however, the crowd started jeering and throwing stones right away. In a panic, the dictator and his wife fled, briefly escaping in a helicopter before being captured. On December 25, an ad hoc tribunal convicted them of theft and genocide on the spot. Soldiers promptly marched the couple out of the court to a nearby wall and shot them, effectively ending communist rule in Romania.⁴⁶

A SLOW TRANSITION IN THE BALKANS

In marked contrast to Romania’s rapid change, the other communist countries in the Balkans experienced long, painful transitions roiled by serious ethnic violence. In Bulgaria, the poorest country in Eastern Europe, the communist leadership continued to cling to power by manipulating anti-Muslim prejudice, while in Yugoslavia, rival ethnic groups plunged the country into civil war.

Amid the political change sweeping Eastern Europe in 1989, the political maneuvers that had kept Bulgaria’s wily communist autocrat, Todor Zhivkov, in power for thirty-five years no longer seemed to work. To divert attention from a collapsing economy, Zhivkov tried to appeal to the Christian majority by expelling 350,000 Muslims into Turkey, which

visibly devastated agriculture in key regions and inspired dissidents to form a human rights movement. In November, the Communist Party leadership announced Zhivkov's ouster and his succession by the foreign minister. But thousands of demonstrators, inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall, would fill the capital's streets for weeks of vocal demonstrations until the party leaders agreed to serious negotiations.⁴⁷ In the free multiparty elections of June 1990, the communists still won a majority of seats. Within a month, however, more protests forced them to cede the presidency to the leader of the democratic opposition, formally ending communist rule there.⁴⁸

The transition in Yugoslavia was even more protracted and painful. As a confederation of six ethnic republics held together by the aura of its longtime leader, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia began to display tensions after his death in 1980. Within a year, the Albanian ethnic majority in the province of Kosovo began pressing for autonomy. In response, the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, after taking office as president of Serbia in 1989, tried to consolidate control by invoking Serbian nationalism, sparking strong protests in Croatia and Slovenia. In January 1990, only weeks after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Croatia and Slovenia forced the Yugoslav League of Communists to break into separate socialist parties—effectively dissolving the main political mechanism that had unified Yugoslavia for the whole of the Cold War.⁴⁹

With the backing of Germany, both Croatia and Slovenia held referenda in which over 90 percent of voters opted for independence, which was duly declared on June 25, 1991. The next day, Yugoslav army troops advanced from a base in Croatia toward the border between Slovenia and Italy—prompting the European Union to intercede, arrange a cease-fire, and facilitate the Yugoslav army's withdrawal from Slovenia.⁵⁰

On Christmas Eve of 1991 amid those delicate negotiations, Germany unilaterally recognized the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. With Yugoslavia now breaking apart, the federation erupted into civil wars that would roil the Balkans for a decade and leave 140,000 people dead. The ethnic violence included bitter fighting between Muslim and Christian militias in Bosnia; a short, blood-soaked breakaway by the Republika Srpska in Bosnia, exemplified by the merciless slaughter of seven thousand Muslims in the city of Srebrenica; and the war-crimes trial of Slobodan Milošević before the International Tribunal at the Hague that ended in 2006 with his death in custody. After playing a marginal role in Eastern Europe's

autumn revolutions, Washington participated in a NATO bombing campaign against the Republika Srpska and presided over the 1995 Dayton accords, which ended the fighting in Bosnia. The US also led a second NATO air campaign in 1999 that forced Serbian forces out of Kosovo, initiating an interim UN administration and international recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008, finally closing that tragic chapter in the Cold War's history.⁵¹

THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE

More than any other single event, of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union ended the Cold War. In the space of just three years, 1989 to 1991, Moscow lost six satellite states and fifteen republics, thereby creating twenty-one new free-market and generally democratic sovereign nations. Like the “people power” revolutions that swept across Asia and Europe, the Soviet Union's collapse was the consequence of complex social forces that world leaders could not control. Once again, mass protests, involving millions of ordinary citizens, would play a catalytic role in these events.

In retrospect, the 1980s were a dismal decade for the Soviet Union. As oil prices fell by two-thirds and export earnings cratered, the economy wallowed in the doldrums. Meanwhile, corruption grew, military spending in Afghanistan skyrocketed, and the Soviet standard of living stagnated.⁵²

In 1987, while tensions were building inside the Soviet Union and its East European satellites, the European Community adopted the Single European Act, which allowed the free movement of people and goods among member states. While Western Europe prospered, annual economic growth in the East fell below 1 percent, making the Soviet bloc look like a rusting iron cage. In the midst of this malaise, aging Soviet leaders died in rapid succession—Leonid Brezhnev in 1982 (at seventy-five), Yuri Andropov just two years later (at sixty-nine), and Konstantin Chernenko a year after that (at seventy-three). In March 1985, the Soviet Politburo picked Mikhail Gorbachev, refreshingly youthful at fifty-four, to be the first Soviet leader with a university degree. Inspired by his travels in Western Europe and its air of dynamism, Gorbachev quickly purged the Soviet Politburo's gerontocracy, replacing them with younger members committed to revitalizing the party. During a televised speech in May 1985, he

demanded products “of world market standard,” saying dramatically: “Those who . . . are an obstacle to solving these new tasks must simply get out of the way. Get out of way! Don’t be a hindrance!”⁵³

To cure the Soviet Union’s ills, Gorbachev proclaimed policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*—reform and openness—aimed at revitalizing the Soviet economy and its government bureaucracy. To end a global arms race that had consumed a crippling 20 percent of the Soviet budget, Gorbachev sought détente with President Ronald Reagan at Geneva in November 1985. To break up the collusion between local officials and company managers marked by black markets and bribes, he had the Supreme Soviet pass the Law on State Enterprise in 1987, introducing a mixed economy for the first time.⁵⁴ To outmaneuver the eighteen million officials and party members invested in the old Soviet system, in February 1990 he persuaded the Central Committee to abolish the post of party secretary-general, elect him as the first president of the Soviet Union, and hold parallel presidential elections for all the republics, including Russia—bringing Gorbachev’s ultimate nemesis, Boris Yeltsin, to power there.⁵⁵

After three years of sweeping reforms with zero economic growth, however, *perestroika* became mired in a cesspit of bureaucratic and popular resistance. As problems mounted, Gorbachev lost confidence in his own reforms and canceled his economic liberalization program—a decision one of his allies called “his worst, most dangerous mistake.”⁵⁶

While his socialist reforms were failing, Gorbachev’s renunciation of the Leninist principle of conflict with capitalism and his embrace of the country’s entry into what he called, in 1986, “an interdependent and in many ways integral world” would prove profoundly transformative, launching diplomatic initiatives that, in a synergy with mass protests, precipitated the dismantling of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet bloc.⁵⁷ In 1987, both superpowers signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty eliminating US medium-range missiles from Europe, whose deployment had sparked impassioned protests in England. A year later, Gorbachev proposed conventional arms reductions in Europe that would end an era of Soviet military superiority. In December 1989, Gorbachev and President George H. W. Bush met for a summit aboard naval ships at the Mediterranean island of Malta, where they agreed that the Cold War was indeed over and promised future talks to determine the fate of Germany. That same month, Gorbachev’s spokesman announced “the

Brezhnev doctrine is dead”—referring to Moscow’s right to intervene militarily in East Europe as it had done to crush the Prague Spring in 1968.^{[58](#)}

By 1990, Gorbachev had signed the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, limiting arms for both NATO and the Warsaw Pact’s signatories; participated in the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which built upon the Helsinki Accords to forge continent-wide unity; and, within a year, dissolved both Comecon and the Warsaw Pact, the chief instruments for Soviet dominion over Eastern Europe.

UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS, 1990





THE REVOLT OF THE REPUBLICS

From the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 to the death of the Romanian dictator Ceaușescu that December, Gorbachev had remained neutral as the “autumn revolutions” swept away communist rule in the six Soviet satellites of Eastern Europe. Instead of intervening to save that Soviet sphere, he spoke about “a common European home, from the Atlantic to the Urals.”⁵⁹

When the Soviet Union’s own republics grew restive, however, Gorbachev’s response was more mixed than his bold rhetoric as he vacillated between intervention and tolerance. The first expression of dissent came from the three Baltic republics, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which Moscow had occupied at the start of World War II and ruled harshly ever since. Amid a “singing revolution” of nationalist rock concerts and open-air song fests that erupted in 1988, Estonia’s legislature ruled that its national laws superseded Soviet law; while Lithuania held elections in which 80 percent of the seats were won by non-communist candidates. In August 1989, some two million Baltic citizens joined hands to form a human chain from Tallinn, Estonia, to Riga, Lithuania, passing a single word in three languages from person to person along a four-hundred-mile highway: “Freedom.”⁶⁰ In the free elections inside the Soviet Union that Gorbachev convened in the spring of 1990, non-communist parties won in all three Baltic republics. Chosen as Russia’s president in that same election, Boris Yeltsin declared Russia a sovereign state in June 1990, effectively separating it from its Soviet past and giving him a powerful political base. His example inspired a parallel move by Ukraine’s parliament a month later.⁶¹

As the tempo of protest rose in the Soviet republics, Gorbachev initially relied on the Red Army, still suffering from its Afghan defeat, to stifle dissent and maintain the integrity of the Soviet Union. Not only did he

reject sovereignty for the three Baltic states, but in April 1989 he sent soldiers to break up nationalist demonstrations in Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, that resulted in the deaths of twenty protesters. In January 1990, he dispatched Red Army special forces to end the blood feud between Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, sparking fighting at Baku that killed 140 civilians and forced the Red Army into a humiliating retreat. In January 1991, Soviet troops based in the Baltic republics, acting on Gorbachev's orders, put in another inept performance by shooting civilians. But mass protests by local citizens and a hundred thousand Russians in Moscow soon forced the soldiers back to their barracks—another clear sign of both the rot in the Red Army and the impending mortality of the USSR. When Gorbachev, who resisted granting Lithuania immediate independence, tried to impose a five-year transition period by denying this Soviet republic critical fuel supplies, the Baltic states announced that their annexation in 1940 had been illegal.⁶²

By early 1991, many of Gorbachev's liberal partners in *glasnost* began resigning. When his close ally, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, stepped down, Gorbachev picked a conservative nonentity named Gennady Yanayev as his deputy. By mid-1991, Gorbachev's position was quietly crumbling, though officials in both Moscow and Washington ignored the deepening decline.⁶³

While some of President Bush's advisers urged pressing even harder until the Soviet Union broke apart, the president himself reacted with a caution that made the US a "bystander, a spectator" in the events that ended the Cold War. In the last summit between the superpowers in July 1991, they signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), limiting both to deploying a maximum of six thousand atomic warheads, effectively cutting Moscow's nuclear arsenal by nearly half. During an August visit, in a futile endorsement of Gorbachev's efforts to keep the Soviet Union together, President Bush told the Ukrainian parliament to stick with Moscow, giving what became known as his "chicken Kiev" speech condemning "those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism." His concern over the disposition of Ukraine's vast stockpile of nuclear weapons led him to oppose its independence, but by the end of the month he would recognize the freedom of the three Baltic states, which did not have nuclear weapons.⁶⁴

On August 4, Gorbachev left Moscow for his annual vacation in Crimea, where he planned to finalize an agreement that would replace the Soviet Union with a looser federation. Angered by these plans, Kremlin hardliners led by KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov convened a secret meeting of coup plotters at a Moscow safe house.⁶⁵

THE COUP AGAINST GORBACHEV

On August 19, 1991, the Soviet Union awoke to news that a coup committee headed by Deputy President Yanayev had imposed a nationwide state of emergency, with paratroopers patrolling intersections in Moscow. Meanwhile, armed guards had put Gorbachev under house arrest at his Crimean dacha, terrifying his wife, Raisa, who suffered a stroke. At first these events stunned the nation, but within just three days this conservative coup started to unravel.⁶⁶

As the KGB began rounding up opposition leaders, Boris Yeltsin and his advisers barricaded themselves inside the Russian parliament. At the end of the first day, the tank battalion outside parliament quit the coup, allowing Yeltsin to climb atop a tank to “demand a return of the country to normal constitutional development.”⁶⁷

Then everything went wrong for the coup plotters. The KGB hesitated to enforce their orders. The leaders of the Soviet republics wouldn’t return phone calls. Coup leaders held press conferences with hands trembling in fear. From inside the Russian parliament, Yeltsin announced the formation of a Russian military with himself as commander in chief. And, in a critical contrast with what happened at Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, Soviet military units refused to suppress the swelling popular protests. Most importantly, those protests became a massive “civil resistance” among ordinary Muscovites that condemned the coup to failure. On the fourth day, the coup committee collapsed—with some going into hiding, others arrested, and three plotters dying by suicide. Crowds in Moscow cheered their defeat.⁶⁸

While Gorbachev was flying back to Moscow and taking a day to tend to his ailing wife, Yeltsin was moving quickly, as president of Russia, to take control of the state apparatus. Working through the night amid the chaos, he restored order in Moscow and forced Gorbachev to fire the heads of the security services. In deft maneuvering before the Russian parliament on

August 23, Yeltsin banned the Communist Party as a “criminal organization” and confiscated its assets, while Gorbachev protested these actions as precipitous.⁶⁹

Although Gorbachev’s power was fading fast and the USSR was collapsing, it would take another four months to complete the formalities of declarations, dissolutions, and affirmations. Between August and December 1991, a dozen republics declared their independence and local elites, many of them former party bosses, took control of the newly independent nations. Fearing arrest by Gorbachev’s KGB, the leaders of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine met secretly in a forest on the Polish-Belorussian border on December 8 to dissolve the Soviet Union, create a new Commonwealth of Independent States, and then call an astonished Gorbachev to tell him what they had done. In the Cold War’s final phase of decolonization, the Soviet Union had, as one historian noted, “confronted the corrosive impact of anti-imperialist nationalism.”⁷⁰

By Christmas, the Soviet Union had dissolved, rendering Gorbachev’s presidency meaningless. As he was about to announce his resignation on December 25, he made a quick phone call to President Bush in Washington, who replied: “At this historic time, we salute you and thank you for what you have done for world peace.” In a televised address to the Russian people, Gorbachev said: “The totalitarian system has been eliminated, which prevented this country from becoming prosperous. . . . I am positive that sooner or later . . . our nations will live in a prosperous, democratic society. I wish everyone the best.” A few minutes later, at 7:32 p.m., the red Soviet flag came down and the Russian tricolor was raised above the Kremlin. As his military aides slipped away to deliver the nuclear codes to his successor Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev repaired to the Kremlin’s Walnut Room for a drink with five close aides, and then went home to his wife as the former president of a defunct nation.⁷¹

In a blaze of fireworks over Red Square on December 31, President Yeltsin inaugurated the new Russian Federation—ending the Soviet Union after nearly three-quarters of a century. Within a year, he had privatized a full third of state enterprises, thereby dissolving the economic foundation of socialism and creating a new class of predatory capitalists.⁷²

And the Cold War was over.



The US administrator for Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III, visits an oil field, Iraq, June 2, 2003. (Credit: Associated Press)

CHAPTER 16

TOWARD A NEW COLD WAR

In the spring of 2024, two summit meetings at the antipodes of Eurasia issued communiqués bristling with antagonisms of a sort quite similar to those that had divided the world during the Cold War. Meeting at Beijing in May to the sounds of trumpet fanfares and gun salutes, Russian president Vladimir Putin and China’s Xi Jinping released a statement criticizing the US for still thinking “in terms of the Cold War and . . . the logic of bloc confrontation,” with missile deployments “which pose a direct threat to the security of Russia and China.” Only a month later at a luxury resort in Apulia, Italy, the leaders of the G-7 Western alliance punished Russia’s “illegal war of aggression” against Ukraine by expropriating \$50 billion of its frozen assets, while condemning China’s “coercive and intimidation activities in the South China Sea.”¹

That war of words represented a profound change in the world order since the close of the Cold War thirty years earlier. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Washington stood astride the globe like a Titan of Greek legend—the sole superpower, capable of remaking the world as it wished. Convinced that “the end of history” would make its free-market democracy the future of all humankind, American leaders, “drunk with power,” advanced sweeping decisions for a new world order that served their short-term interests but would later have deleterious long-term consequences for their global hegemony.²

At the close of the Cold War, Washington used its untrammelled power to forge a wide-open global economy. In a powerful one-two punch that broke down barriers to unchecked capital flows, Washington launched the World Trade Organization in 1995, which lent a distinct hand to multinational corporations, while the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank pressed open-market “structural adjustment programs” on developing economies worldwide—including the former socialist states of Eastern

Europe, ex-military dictatorships in Latin America, and developing nations in Africa. Washington also led the world in building a global communications grid by laying 700,000 miles of fiber-optic submarine cables and launching eight hundred satellites. As its open capital market covered the globe, US foreign investment rose nearly tenfold from \$700 billion in 1990 to \$6.3 trillion in 2014.³

By 2010, however, economic globalization was cutting good-paying factory jobs across the United States and income inequality was widening—essential ingredients for rising working-class resentment and deepening domestic divisions. As one index of social inequality, the number of billionaires worldwide would increase tenfold from just 291 in 1992 to 2,781 in 2024, with a total wealth of \$14.2 trillion. Foolhardy military misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, pushed by Washington elites heedless about the limits of fading US global power, stoked simmering anger among ordinary Americans, slowly discrediting the very idea of international commitments. And the erosion of America's relative economic strength from half the world's output in 1950 to a quarter in 2010 meant the wherewithal for its unipolar power was clearly declining.⁴

Only a decade after the Cold War ended, Washington started facing serious strategic challenges across the Eurasian continent, which remained the epicenter of geopolitical power. In the heady aftermath of its great Cold War victory, the US had attempted some bold strategic gambits that soon proved ill-advised. Above all, Washington's leaders believed they could co-opt Beijing's rising power by recognizing China as an equal trading partner. In an attempt to curb Moscow's imperial ambitions, the US also presided over NATO's expansion until that alliance surrounded Russia's western borders, sparking security concerns in Moscow. These ill-fated initiatives, combined with those ill-considered military interventions in the Middle East, created conditions for the revival of great-power rivalry that, since Russia's annexed Crimea in 2014, many observers have already come to call "the new Cold War."⁵

Oblivious to the geopolitics it had once manipulated so masterfully, Washington failed to maintain its strategic dominion over the vast Eurasian landmass, which was the main arena for strategic rivalry in the new Cold War just as it had been in the old one. At the peak of US unipolar power in the late 1990s, former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, drawing upon Sir Halford Mackinder's geopolitical theories, warned that

Eurasia remained “the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played.” Thus, Washington must, Brzezinski suggested, avoid three key pitfalls that could erode its international influence. First, it must preserve its strategic “perch on the Western periphery” of Eurasia by maintaining the NATO alliance. Second, it must block the rise of “an assertive single entity” in the strategic “middle space” of Eurasia. Finally, it had to prevent “the expulsion of America from its offshore [military] bases” at the eastern end of Eurasia along the Pacific littoral.⁶ To those three arenas of geopolitical contestation, he should have added the importance of maintaining an effective presence in Mackinder’s “marginal crescent,” centered on the Middle East, where the US had struggled successfully for dominance during the Cold War and has faced continuing strategic challenges ever since.

In the quarter-century following Brzezinski’s prescient warning, a succession of foreign policy failures has eroded the US position in each of those strategic arenas. That geopolitical reality was soon manifest in a succession of crises across Eurasia—including Russia’s relentless invasion of Ukraine, Israel’s occupation of Gaza, the disastrous US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and China’s military pressure on Taiwan. Not only did failures in each of those strategic areas reflect growing problems for the US global presence, but they also contributed to conditions for the emergence of a new Cold War.

THE AMERICAN STRATEGIC “PERCH” IN EUROPE

For three decades after the Cold War ended, Washington faced its most sustained challenge in trying to preserve its strategic “perch” in Europe, arguably the most critical element in Brzezinski’s formula for the preservation of US global power. The threat arose largely from Washington’s problematic diplomatic initiatives after the breakup of the Soviet Union, which inadvertently catalyzed the revival of Russia’s bid for global power. At first, American officials were focused on securing the massive Soviet arsenal of forty-five thousand nuclear warheads, particularly the four thousand atomic weapons stored in Ukraine as well as lesser numbers in Belarus and Kazakhstan. In July 1991, President George H. W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Strategic Arms

Reduction Treaty (START), which called for a mutual reduction of nuclear-armed missiles and heavy bombers. Two years later, Moscow and Washington signed START II, agreeing to a mutual reduction to 3,500 nuclear warheads within ten years.⁷

Under the Budapest Memorandum promulgated in December 1994, three former Soviet republics—Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine—all signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and started transferring their atomic weapons to Russia.⁸ Simultaneously, Great Britain, Russia, and the US agreed to respect the sovereignty of the three signatories. However, everyone present seemed to understand that such an agreement was, at best, tenuous. One Ukrainian diplomat told the Americans he had “no illusions that the Russians would live up to the agreements they signed.”⁹ Indeed, Russian president Boris Yeltsin raged against Washington’s plans to expand NATO further, accusing President Bill Clinton of moving from a Cold War to a “cold peace.” Right after that Budapest conference, Defense Secretary William Perry also warned President Clinton, point-blank, that “a wounded Moscow would lash out in response to NATO expansion.” The architect of the original Cold War “containment” strategy, George Kennan, stated publicly that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era.”¹⁰

Nonetheless, once those former Soviet republics were safely disarmed of their nuclear weapons, Clinton agreed to admit new members to NATO, launching its relentless eastward march toward Russia that, by 2004, had incorporated three former Soviet republics and six former satellites. At the alliance’s Bucharest summit in 2008, moreover, its twenty-six members unanimously agreed that Ukraine and Georgia, too, would, at some unspecified point “become members of NATO.”¹¹ In other words, having pushed NATO right up to the Ukrainian border, Washington now seemed oblivious to the possibility that Russia might feel threatened and react by annexing all or part of that country to create its own security corridor.

Forgoing any sort of Marshall Plan-style aid to ease Russia’s painful transition to capitalism, Washington seemed to feel its post-Cold War globalization would both promote democracy there and integrate that country into an emerging American world order, perhaps as a secondary power supplying cheap commodities for the global economy. For Russia, globalization produced a dismal decade in the 1990s, marked by what economist Jeffrey Sachs has called a “serious economic and financial crisis”

and a privatization of state enterprises “rife with unfairness and corruption” that created a coterie of predatory Russian oligarchs.¹²

Russia’s ultimate rejection of the US world order had deep historical wellsprings. For two centuries, while the rest of Europe was developing democracy, Russian autocrats from Catherine the Great to Joseph Stalin had maintained domestic stability through imperial expansion. “The British *had* an empire,” wrote historian Geoffrey Hosking, “but Russia *was* an empire”—adding, by way of explanation, that “the survival of the empire and the maintenance of its territorial integrity were the paramount priorities for Russia’s leaders.”¹³

When Vladimir Putin became prime minister amid the post-Soviet malaise of the late 1990s, he reverted to that very imperial mode and found his vision for Russia’s revival as a “great power” in the writings of Alexandr Dugin, an eccentric exponent of “Eurasianism.” After years of obscurity in Moscow’s bohemian fringe, Dugin won fame with a 1997 bestseller, *The Foundations of Geopolitics: Russia’s Geopolitical Future*. By simply making Russian readers aware of Mackinder (whom they had ignored for nearly a century) and the concept of geopolitics (which the Soviet academy had dismissed as “a bourgeois, reactionary conception”), Dugin achieved an exceptional impact. As his book moved into its fourth printing and he became known as “Putin’s brain,” Dugin gained a wide audience for his views that Russia should conquer Georgia, incorporate Finland, and annex Ukraine. More broadly, he argued that it was “the planetary civilizational mission of the Russian people . . . to establish a gigantic geopolitical continental bloc” whose aim was to undermine the US through “the complete destruction of its geopolitical constructs.”¹⁴

Calling the collapse of the Soviet Union the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” in a 2005 address, Putin set about reclaiming much of the old Soviet sphere—invading Georgia in 2008 when it began flirting with NATO membership; deploying troops in 2020–23 to resolve an Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in favor of a pro-Moscow regime in Baku; and dispatching thousands of Russian special forces to Kazakhstan in 2022 to gun down pro-democracy protesters challenging a loyal Russian ally.¹⁵

Moscow’s main push has been in the old Soviet sphere of Eastern Europe, where Putin backed the Belarus strongman Aleksandr Lukashenko in crushing the democratic opposition after he rigged the 2020 elections, thereby making Minsk a virtual client state. Meanwhile, Putin pressed

relentlessly against Ukraine after the ouster of his loyal surrogate in the 2014 Maidan “color revolution”—first seizing Crimea, next arming separatist rebels in the country’s eastern Donbas region adjacent to Russia, and finally invading in 2022 with nearly two hundred thousand troops, sparking a protracted war.¹⁶

At first, as Ukraine fought the Russians off, Washington and the West reacted with a striking resolve by imposing serious sanctions on Moscow, dispatching armaments to Ukraine and expanding NATO to all of Scandinavia. Moreover, Ukraine showed a surprising flair for unconventional operations—clearing Russian ships off the Black Sea with naval drones, sabotaging its massive gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea, and, in its first assassination attempt, blowing up Alexander Dugin’s automobile near Moscow, killing his daughter.¹⁷

After two years of continuous combat, however, cracks opened in the anti-Russian coalition, indicating that Washington’s global clout had declined markedly since its Cold War glory days. After thirty years of free-market growth, Russia’s resilient economy proved quite capable of weathering the West’s sanctions, while its oil exports found new markets and its gross domestic product grew by a healthy 3.5 percent in 2024. In that summer’s fighting season, moreover, a Ukrainian “counteroffensive” failed. In the view of both Russian and Ukrainian commanders, the war was at least “stalemated,” if not beginning to turn in Russia’s favor.¹⁸

Most critically, once-unified American domestic support for Ukraine started to falter under partisan pressures, amplified by rising populist opposition to globalization and military alliances in both the US and Europe. After successfully rallying NATO to stand with Ukraine, President Joseph Biden opened America’s arsenal to Kyiv until Republican legislators, at Donald Trump’s behest, delayed military aid for a critical seven months.¹⁹ But the problem went much deeper. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks noted, the Republican Party’s historic “isolationism is still on the march.” Indeed, between March 2022 and December 2023, Pew research found that the percentage of Republicans who thought their country gave “too much support” to Ukraine had climbed from just 9 percent to a hefty 48 percent. Asked to explain the trend, Brooks felt that “Trumpian populism does represent some very legitimate values: the fear of imperial overreach . . . [and] the need to protect working-class wages from the pressures of globalization.”²⁰ For the first time in seventy-

five years, there were clear signs of trouble for US participation in the NATO alliance.

DEFEAT IN EURASIA'S MIDDLE SPACE

Driven by changing geopolitical alignments, Washington has failed to prevent the rise of “an assertive single entity” in Eurasia’s “middle space”—the second of Zbigniew Brzezinski’s conditions for the maintenance of US global power. Indeed, the chaotic American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 became a foreign policy debacle that would deny the US any real presence in this strategic region. Its intervention there had begun twenty years earlier in 2001 after the Islamic militant Osama bin Laden directed terrorist attacks on America from a base inside that country. When Washington invaded Afghanistan that October, it scored a stunning victory over the Taliban government thanks to a combination of strong local support on the ground and a close geopolitical alignment with Pakistan and China—conditions quite similar to those that had facilitated the US defeat of the Soviets there during the 1980s.

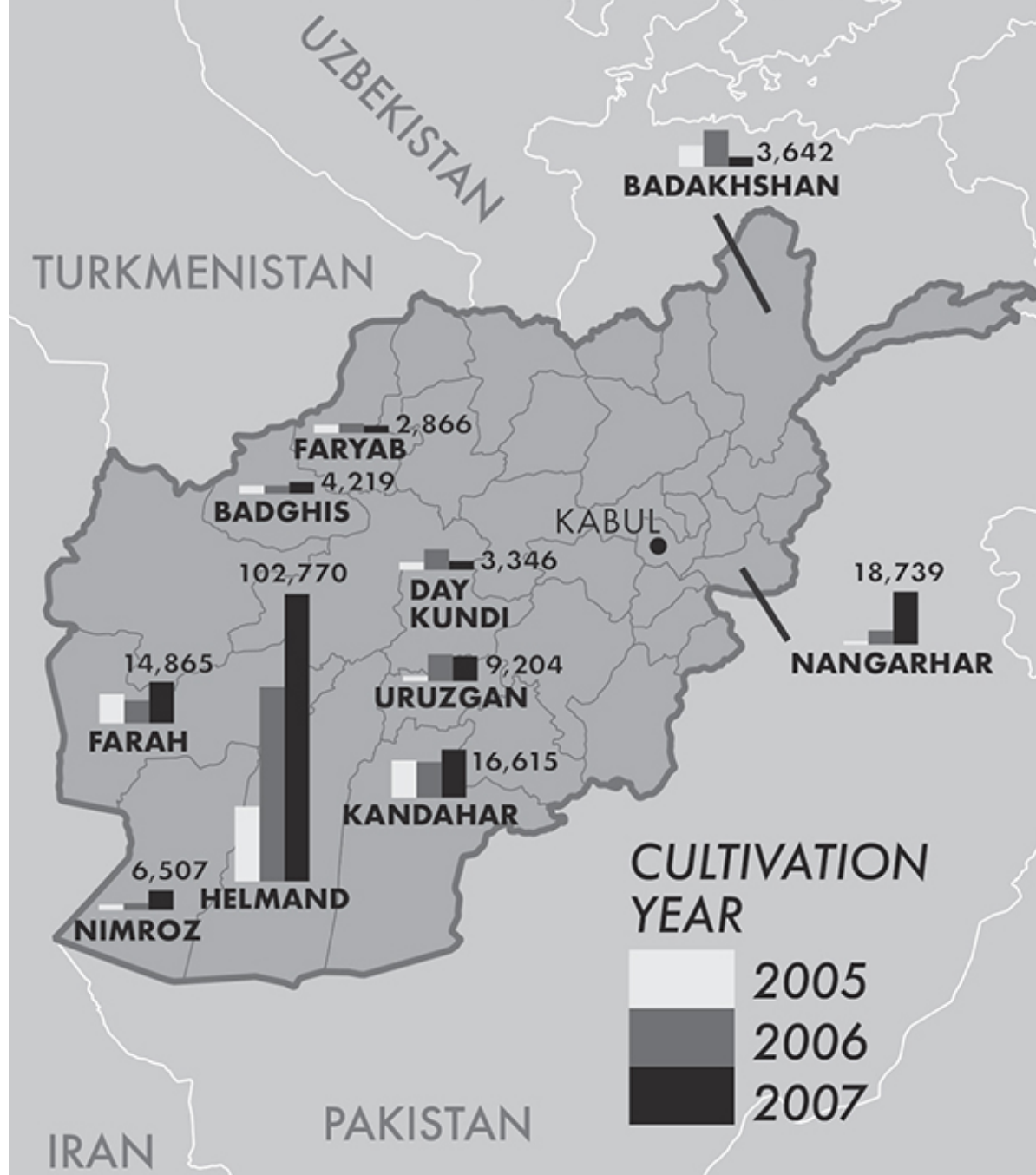
Right from the start of the US occupation of Afghanistan in 2002, however, that alignment of the region’s geopolitics and gritty local forces started to come apart at the seams. For a start, the rapid proliferation of opium production would make it impossible for the US to control the country’s rural districts. After capturing much of the countryside from the Taliban, Washington’s warlord allies presided over a revived opium harvest that surged from 185 tons in 2001 to 8,200 tons by 2007—generating an extraordinary 53 percent of the country’s gross domestic product and 93 percent of the world’s illicit heroin. Significantly, the UN reported that Taliban guerrillas had also “started to extract from the drug economy resources for arms, logistics, and militia pay.”²¹ In a telling juxtaposition, between 2002 and 2017 Afghanistan’s opium cultivation grew from just 8,000 hectares to 328,000 hectares, while Taliban attacks surged from only 372 to 26,286.²²

Once American forces ended major combat operations in Afghanistan in late 2014, the Taliban were ready to launch mass-formation attacks in the north, northeast, and south of the country—killing record numbers of US-trained Afghan troops and soon occupying half the countryside. Not

surprisingly, the strongest attacks came in the heroin heartland of Helmand Province, where, according to the *New York Times*, “the lucrative opium trade made it crucial to the insurgents’ economic designs.”²³

Meanwhile, China began a geopolitical squeeze play, signing lavish development deals with the countries surrounding Afghanistan and so forcing US air support to fly two thousand miles round trip from the nearest American bases in the far-off Persian Gulf, creating potential problems for US troops still on the ground. Compounding the problem, the first Trump administration’s diplomacy broke Brzezinski’s Cold War alignment of China-Pakistan-US—trashing relations with Islamabad in a 2018 tweet, while allying openly with its historic enemy India under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and declaring a trade war on Beijing. With Washington’s once-perfect alignment of global and local forces now fatally misaligned, both Donald Trump’s peace agreement with the Taliban in 2020 and Joseph Biden’s decision to withdraw American troops a year later were a belated recognition of geopolitical reality. After guerrillas captured most of the country’s provincial capitals and Afghan army commanders started surrendering without a fight, Taliban rebels drove into Kabul in captured US Humvees in August 2021. That dramatically visible defeat for Washington would rival the 1975 fall of Saigon as a blow to its world leadership.²⁴ Moreover, the withdrawal left the US, for the first time in eighty years, without any close allies whatsoever in Eurasia’s “middle space,” ceding that strategic region to Chinese influence.

AFGHANISTAN OPIUM AREA (IN HECTARES) 2005-2007





THE EASTERN END OF EURASIA

As Washington was investing its wealth and armed strength so fruitlessly in the Middle East, Beijing was spending the same decades building industries that would make it the workshop of the world. Through such dynamic growth, China gained the raw economic power to challenge US geopolitical dominance over Eurasia, potentially precipitating its expulsion from those “offshore bases” along the Pacific littoral, whose preservation was Brzezinski’s final criterion for the perpetuation of US global hegemony.

In a major strategic miscalculation, Washington admitted Beijing to the World Trade Organization in 2001, confident that a compliant China, though home to 20 percent of the planet’s population, would somehow join the world economy without changing the global balance of power. According to two Washington insiders, there was an illusory bipartisan consensus that “U.S. power and hegemony could readily mold China to the United States’ liking.” Instead, by 2007 Chinese imports had helped “erase nearly a quarter of all U.S. manufacturing jobs.” As Beijing’s industrial output increased nearly three-fold to \$3.2 trillion in 2016, China’s foreign currency reserves surged from just \$200 billion in 2001 to a monumental \$4 trillion by 2013—ample cash to fund a serious bid for global power.²⁵

In 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping announced a development scheme called the Belt and Road Initiative, which promised to build a massive infrastructure of rails, roads, ports, and pipelines across the enormous Eurasian landmass. Not only would that infrastructure increase the economic integration of Eurasia, home to 70 percent of the world’s population and productivity, but it could also incorporate great swaths of Mackinder’s tri-continental “world island” of Africa, Asia, and Europe into China’s version of the world economy. Within a decade, Beijing had, in fact, expended a trillion dollars on that project, making it the largest investment in human history, ten times bigger than the US Marshall Plan

that rebuilt a ravaged Europe after World War II.²⁶ Propelled by the raw geopolitical power from its conjoining of the continents of Europe and Asia into “Eurasia,” Beijing seemed ready to follow Mackinder’s geopolitical axiom that control over the Central Asian “Heartland” would lead to control over Eurasia, and control over Eurasia meant control of the world.

Paralleling its geopolitical ascent, China was fast becoming the world’s preeminent economic power. “By 2030,” the US National Intelligence Council had warned, “Asia will have surpassed North America and Europe combined in terms of global power, based on GDP, population size, military spending, and technological investment. China alone will probably have the largest economy, surpassing that of the United States a few years before 2030.”²⁷ Driving that shift was China’s growing prowess in knowledge production, the foundation for modern military and industrial strength. In the 2012 PISA examinations (tests of fifteen-year-olds worldwide by the Program for International Student Assessment), the US placed thirty-fourth in math and twenty-sixth in science, while China came first in both—laying a firm foundation for its rapid scientific ascent as those teenagers became adults. After increasing its basic research budget by 200 percent from 2012 to 2021, China passed the US for the first time in publishing highly cited scientific research papers. Within two years, China was leading the world in research for fifty-seven of sixty-four critical technologies such as alternative energy and robotics, while the US led in just seven areas. During President Trump’s second term, moreover, those trends accelerated as his administration cut the nation’s research budget by half and blocked recruitment of foreign scientific talent. Not only was China taking the lead in technologies such as drones, electric vehicles, and solar panels, but it was also positioning itself for a future preeminence within the global economy.²⁸

Complementing its quest for economic dominance over Eurasia, China expanded its blue-water navy and began building a regional network of overseas military bases in a bid to dominate a vast arc of oceans surrounding Asia—from the Horn of Africa, across the Indian Ocean, and along its own coast all the way to Korea. By 2020, China had produced the world’s largest navy of 350 ships and submarines (America had 293), backed by a massive armada of land-based missiles and jet fighters. With a shipbuilding capacity 230 times larger than America’s, by 2028 China will have 440 battle force ships compared with the US Navy’s 291. Wedded to traditions and industrial interests that favor larger ships, the US Navy has

been slow to embrace new technologies like maritime drones that might compensate for the disparity in fleet size.²⁹

Just as Russia's invasion of Ukraine revitalized the NATO alliance, so China's challenge, combined with a sustained US military expansion under three successive administrations, rebuilt Washington's weakened position along the Pacific littoral. After President Barack Obama proclaimed a strategic "pivot" to Asia in 2011, the Trump administration revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in 2017 (with Australia, India, and Japan) and the Biden White House formed the AUKUS security alliance with Australia and Britain. Through such initiatives, Washington won back two wavering allies, Australia and the Philippines, making them once again anchors for an island chain along the Pacific littoral that remains the key geopolitical fulcrum for American global defense.³⁰

While Washington was preoccupied with Ukraine, it was also at the threshold of a growing crisis in the Taiwan Straits, where China was putting relentless pressure on that island's sovereignty. Beijing's breaches of Taiwan's airspace increased from 400 in 2020 to 1,700 in 2023. In the eighteen months after August 2022, Chinese warships crossed the median line in the Taiwan Straits three hundred times, effectively erasing it. As commentator Ben Lewis warned, "There soon may be no lines left for China to cross." Adding force to China's challenge, in mid-2024 China and Russia held joint military exercises, with live-firing naval drills in the South China Sea and air maneuvers ranging from the area around Taiwan to the skies near Alaska.³¹

If Beijing were to impose a "customs quarantine" around Taiwan sometime in the near future, it could potentially threaten any American warships in the area with a lethal swarm of nuclear submarines, jet aircraft, and ship-killing missiles.³² Should the US Navy back off rather than suffer casualties and likely ship losses not seen since World War II, Taiwan would eventually be forced to negotiate the terms of its reunification with China. Such a humiliating reversal, should it occur, could cut the chain of American "offshore bases" along the Pacific littoral, pushing the US back to a "second island chain" stretching from Japan to Guam in the mid-Pacific and reducing its ability to defend its Asian allies—a serious blow to its global hegemony. Alternatively, should China opt for an amphibious invasion of Taiwan, the resulting war would have profound yet unpredictable outcomes for all the major players.³³

THE CRISIS IN THE MARGINAL CRESCENT

Since 2001, Washington has also faced a series of crises in Mackinder's "marginal crescent"—specifically, in the wider Middle East region that has long served as Eurasia's geopolitical zone of conflict. In response to the terrorist attacks of September 2001, Washington launched a Global War on Terror, combining a covert intervention in Afghanistan and a conventional invasion of Iraq. Both missions would soon segue from sudden, heady triumph to grinding, demoralizing defeat.

On the basis of bogus intelligence that Iraq's Baathist regime was about to acquire nuclear weapons, the administration of George W. Bush invaded Iraq in March 2003 with an overwhelming force of 177,000 troops, capturing the capital city of Baghdad in just twenty-two days. The subsequent military occupation would, however, become a debacle, in part thanks to the work of two latter-day men on the spot whose individual initiatives took Washington's policy in directions that soon proved detrimental.

The head of the new Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III, used his office for decisions deemed questionable at best. After graduating from Yale University and Harvard Business School, Bremer had a fast-track diplomatic career that led to a top post with Kissinger Associates and a gilded résumé devoid of any extended Middle East experience. Nonetheless, the war's suspension of Iraqi sovereignty and the terms of his appointment invested Bremer with ample autonomy to become Washington's man on the spot in Baghdad, or what President Bush called "the guy on the ground."³⁴

Landing in Baghdad on May 11, 2003, just two weeks after the end of combat operations, Bremer quickly created chaos with just two strokes of his pen. On May 16, his fifth day in office, Bremer signed Order No. 1, purging from office all senior Iraqi officials affiliated with the ruling Baath Party. "By nightfall," the CIA chief of station warned Bremer, "you'll have driven some 30,000 to 50,000 Baathists underground. And in six months you'll really regret this." Dismissing what he called "a sea of bitching and moaning," Bremer plunged ahead, forcing at least eighty-five thousand Iraqi officials out of office. US commander General Ricardo Sanchez later called this decision "a catastrophic failure."³⁵

A week later, Bremer signed Order No. 2, aimed at “dissolving Saddam’s military and intelligence structures to emphasize that we mean business.” In effect, Bremer summarily dismissed 335,000 police and 385,000 soldiers without salary, severance pay, or pensions, thereby creating a vast cadre of what the US Army’s official war history would call “seasoned military men who suddenly had no livelihood.”³⁶

Those demobilized Iraqi soldiers also included trained specialists with access to cached munitions and the skills to turn them into lethal improvised explosive devices. Over the next ten years, IEDs would kill 3,100 US servicemen and wound 33,000 more, forcing the Pentagon to spend \$75 billion trying to prevent further fatalities from a simple weapon that cost just a few hundred dollars to build. “Orders 1 and 2 led to a far more sweeping implosion [of the Iraqi state] than U.S. leaders intended,” the US Army’s official history later reported, “after which factions of all kinds, including extremist militants, rushed to fill the void.”³⁷

In the midst of a spreading insurgency in 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld dispatched retired colonel James Steele, who had headed the US military mission to El Salvador in the mid-1980s, for a three-year tour as “senior police adviser with the Iraqi police SWAT unit in Baghdad.” Although he arrived undercover as a mere “energy consultant,” Steele’s exceptional authority, as Secretary Rumsfeld’s personal emissary, gave him the autonomy to operate covertly as the Pentagon’s man on the spot in Iraq.³⁸

When General David Petraeus became the military commander there in mid-2004, he appointed Steele, whom he knew from El Salvador, to improve the Iraqi police, who were performing poorly. Using a tactical approach known as the “Salvadoran option,” Steele helped transform the Iraqi Wolf Brigade of Special Police Commandos into a “terrifying force” that operated fourteen torture centers and assassinated Iraqi insurgents.³⁹ In a secret September 2005 memo addressed to “Don Rumsfeld,” Steele stated bluntly that the Wolf Brigade was led by a “thug . . . who has been involved in death squad activities, extortion of detainees and a general pattern of corruption.”⁴⁰ After firing the chief of Iraq’s national police, who favored community policing and conflict resolution, Steele replaced him with a Shi’a Muslim sectarian partisan who presided over death squads, contributing to a religious war between rival Islamic sects that would soon leave some 1,600 to 3,000 bodies scattered on the streets of Baghdad every

month.⁴¹ Such death-squad activities, in concert with media exposés of CIA torture techniques at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, seriously damaged Washington’s standing in the international community.

By the time the US withdrew most of its troops from Iraq in 2017, American military leaders concluded that their overall performance in the Iraq War had been nothing short of dismal. At a price of nearly 4,500 American soldiers killed, about one million Iraqi civilians dead, and war costs that reached \$2 trillion, the Army’s official war history concluded that “U.S. efforts . . . were inefficient, disjointed, and ultimately unsuccessful” in nation-building and “an emboldened and expansionist Iran appears to be the only victor.”⁴² And the critical roles played by Bremer and Steele arguably compounded such difficulties. Instead of expanding American influence like their Cold War counterparts, those two latter-day men on the spot became inadvertent instruments of a US retreat from the Middle East, contributing to an eclipse of their country’s global influence.

As the shock waves of the Iraq intervention were still reverberating, the “marginal crescent” became the site of another iteration of the Cold War’s Arab-Israeli conflict in Gaza. At the close of the Cold War, when the Middle East was momentarily disentangled from great-power politics, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization had signed the 1993 Oslo Accords, agreeing to the creation of the Palestinian Authority as a first step toward a two-state solution.⁴³ For the next two decades, however, Washington’s ineffectual initiatives failed to break the deadlock between that authority and successive Israeli governments, precluding any genuine progress toward such a solution. After the October 2023 Hamas attack on southern Israel, it soon became clear that Washington’s diffident diplomacy had damaged its leadership in the Middle East, making any lasting resolution of that divisive conflict unlikely.⁴⁴

THE NEW COLD WAR

These disparate developments across Eurasia fostered a renewed great-power rivalry that became worthy of the phrase “the new Cold War.” In a key parallel with the 1950s, Beijing and Moscow forged a multifaceted economic and strategic alliance that they said, in February 2022, had “no limits.”⁴⁵ Within days of that announcement, the Russian president sent

nearly two hundred thousand troops across Ukraine's borders in a pell-mell drive to capture that country's capital, Kyiv. As Ukrainian defenders armed with US- and NATO-supplied shoulder-fired missiles destroyed 2,500 of its armored vehicles, Russia was forced to pull back from its bid to capture the Ukrainian capital and instead shift to consolidating its control over the country's eastern borderlands. Washington quickly rallied the NATO alliance to support Kyiv with shipments of arms and ammunition. To survive the West's economic embargo, President Putin slowly pulled together a coalition of autocratic allies to sustain his war effort. By the time the Ukraine war entered its third year, much of the world was divided into diplomatic blocs that mimed those at the start of the original Cold War.

By backing Russia as a way to ensure its own food and energy security, while also maintaining access to Europe through formal neutrality, Beijing could emerge from this conflict as Moscow did after the Korean War, with its global influence enhanced. And by attacking Ukraine and alienating Europe, Putin had suffered a serious but not necessarily fatal geopolitical blow. Blocked from expanding westward, he accelerated Russia's "pivot to the East," rapidly integrating its economy with China's—forging an entente that, like the Sino-Soviet bloc of the 1950s, could eventually exercise geopolitical dominance over the vast Eurasian landmass, still the epicenter of global power. More immediately, the alliance gave both powers significant geopolitical advantages. Freed from securing its long land border across Asia, Russia could concentrate its armed forces on its western frontier for a protracted war with Ukraine, while China could do the same by focusing its aerospace assets on the Pacific for military pressure on Taiwan.⁴⁶

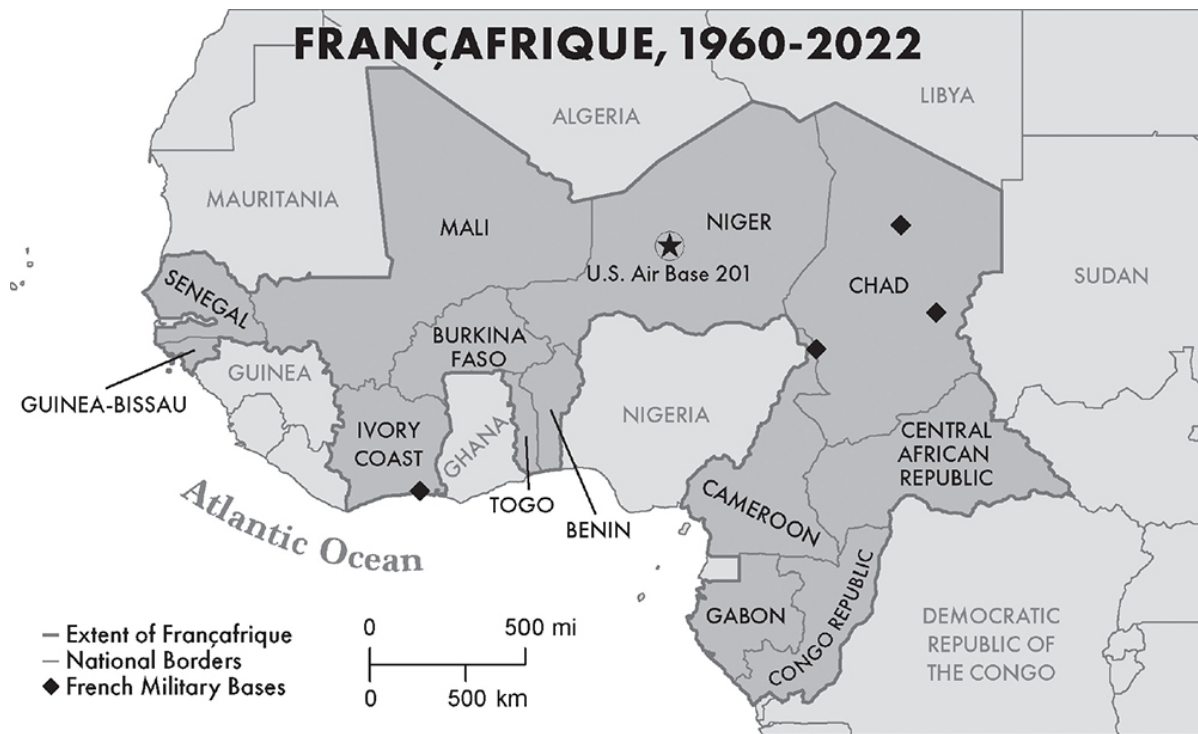
In his bid for greater global power, Putin's geopolitical ambitions were by no means limited to Europe or even Eurasia, but, like his Soviet predecessors, also extended into Africa and the Middle East. As the NATO alliance moved ever closer to Russia's sensitive western border, Putin reacted with repeated interventions in Ukraine and a little-understood geopolitical maneuver that played out across two continents.

Starting in 2015, Moscow hopped over the NATO barrier of Turkey by opening a massive air base at Latakia in northern Syria that soon reduced cities like Aleppo, held by rebels fighting the Assad regime, to rubble. Simultaneously, Russia reopened its Cold War naval base nearby at Tartus, providing its warships direct access to the Mediterranean.⁴⁷ In 2021,

Moscow skipped over another US ally, Israel, and began supplying Cairo with two dozen of its advanced Sukhoi-35 jet fighters so that Egyptian airmen could compete with Israelis flying advanced American F-35 jets. Completing his southern push into the region, Putin befriended Saudi Arabia's uncrowned leader, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, by building on their shared interests as oil exporters.⁴⁸

Using those Syrian bases as a springboard, the final step in Russia's strategy was a geopolitical pivot across northern Africa. After Sudan's president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, offered to make his country Moscow's "key to Africa" in late 2017, Russia's mercenary Wagner Group began airlifting mining equipment to open refineries near Khartoum that made it a major player in the country's gold exports, which reached \$13 billion annually within four years. By deploying its man on the spot Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner Group, Moscow soon extended its influence across Africa country by country, deal by dirty deal. By the time this maneuver was completed in 2023, Russia had outflanked NATO by forming a geopolitical arc of influence sweeping south through the Middle East and extending west across northern Africa from the Red Sea almost to the Atlantic.⁴⁹

Crucial to Russia's success was the end of French neo-colonialism in northern Africa. For sixty years following its formal decolonization of the region, France had used every possible diplomatic device, overt and covert, fair and foul, to incorporate some fourteen African nations into a neocolonial imperium critics called "Françafrique" that covered a quarter of the continent. As Islamic terrorists affiliated with ISIS became active there in 2013, France deployed some five thousand elite troops for Operation Barkhane in collaboration with five nations of Africa's Sahel region, an arid strip of territory extending across the continent just south of the Sahara Desert.⁵⁰



By 2020, however, nationalist consciousness in many of those relatively new countries had begun rising against repeated transgressions of their sovereignty, putting pressure on French forces to withdraw.⁵¹ As French troops were expelled from the northern Africa nations they had been active in since 1960 (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), Russia's secretive Wagner Group moved in and was engaged, by 2023, almost all the way across the Sahel region, from gold mining in Sudan to troop training in Mali.⁵² In August, when Prigozhin rebelled against Russia's generals in a dispute over their joint combat operations in Ukraine, the Kremlin responded by blowing up his executive jet midflight and transferring the Wagner Group's assets in the Sahel region to its own Africa Corps, formalizing Prigozhin's informal influence.⁵³

France was not the only loser from Moscow's geopolitical gambit. Following its expulsion of French forces, in March 2024 Niger's military regime ordered all American troops out of Air Base 201, which Washington had built at a cost of \$110 million for counterterror operations across the whole Sahel region.⁵⁴ Within a month, another Sahel nation, Chad, had expelled a US Special Forces training unit, leaving the US Africa Command "blindsided and puzzled." Finally, in November that country's foreign minister stated that "it is time for Chad to assert its sovereignty,"

and announced “a historic turning point” by expelling French forces from their last foothold in the region, effectively ending Françafrique after sixty years of neocolonial dominion.⁵⁵ Though significant in a regional context, these reverses gain even greater import when placed within wider global trends.

In a classic imperial maneuver, Moscow had used its man on the spot Prigozhin as a stalking horse for a successful geopolitical expansion into northern Africa that served to push both France and the US out of that region. His success stood in stark contrast with his American counterparts in Iraq, coalition administrator L. Paul Bremer and police adviser James Steele, whose failures as men on the spot made them seem inadvertent instruments of a US retreat from the Middle East. Much of Prigozhin’s relative success lay in his role in precipitating a final decolonization of France’s former African empire, an advantage the Americans lacked in Iraq, which was already fully independent.

If we stand back from such specifics for a broader view, it seems striking that just three of those historical actors have appeared on the world stage in the thirty-five years since the Cold War ended. Not only was the Cold War a golden age of espionage, but its convergence with decolonization worldwide allowed frequent geopolitical openings for a man on the spot to influence political developments. Although any future interventions with an asymmetry of power between foreign and local forces may create opportunities for latter-day men on the spot to operate, changed global circumstances, particularly the end of decolonization, will likely make their future appearances far less common.

More broadly, the future of American influence across significant parts of the strategic Eurasian landmass appeared, for the first time in over eighty years, increasingly tenuous. At both axial ends of the continent in Europe and Asia, there were strategic threats that could, in the medium term, weaken a US military position critical for its global hegemony. In Eurasia’s strategic “middle space,” China’s rising influence in Central Asian countries like Afghanistan and Kazakhstan could prove a geopolitical blow to Washington’s global ambitions, equivalent to the impact the Sino-Soviet split had on Moscow during the original Cold War. Already, by 2023, the rise of China as “an assertive single entity” in Eurasia’s middle space had led to a series of diplomatic reverses for Washington—notably, its hasty, humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan; and its weakening ties to long-

standing allies Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, when Turkish-backed rebels captured Damascus in late 2024, sending the dictator Bashar al-Assad fleeing to Moscow and limiting Russia's access to those strategic Syrian bases, the US played no role in this major geopolitical change.⁵⁶

The sum of those strategic challenges around the edge of Eurasia—reflecting Washington's weakened position in the continent's four key geopolitical arenas—revealed a waning of US global hegemony. Indeed, Washington's inability to achieve a satisfactory resolution of serious crises in Ukraine, Israel, Afghanistan, and Taiwan indicated a negative trend in its international influence over the span of a decade, if not longer. Yet even so, the disruptive diplomacy of the second Trump administration would turn that trend in a decidedly downward trajectory.

DONALD TRUMP'S GRAND STRATEGY

With surprising speed following his inauguration in January 2025, President Donald Trump launched a radical "America first" foreign policy that seemed primed to accelerate the decline of Washington's world power, not only in Eurasia but in the country's home continent of North America as well.

In his January 2025 inaugural address, Trump proclaimed a surprising reversion to the imperial age, saying: "President McKinley made our country very rich through tariffs and . . . gave Teddy Roosevelt the money for . . . the Panama Canal, which has foolishly been given to the country of Panama." By invoking a former president best known for conquering an empire of islands stretching from Puerto Rico to the Philippines, Trump was signaling a throwback to a Victorian-era version of great-power politics marked by the urge to take territories, impose tariffs, and conclude diplomatic deals. Such priorities represented a forceful repudiation of the three key attributes of the liberal international order that had marked US global hegemony since 1945: alliances like NATO that treated allies as peer powers, free trade without tariff barriers, and an ironclad assurance of inviolable sovereignty for all nations, large and small.⁵⁷

Amid a torrent of confusing, often contradictory foreign policy pronouncements pouring from the Trump White House, the design of his de facto geopolitical strategy soon took shape. Instead of maintaining mutual-

security alliances like NATO to support a strong geopolitical position in Eurasia, Trump seemed to prefer a globe divided into three major regional blocs, each headed by an empowered leader like himself—with Russia dominating its European periphery, China paramount in Asia, and the United States controlling North America. Reflecting what his defense secretary called a “loathing of European freeloading” and a visceral disdain for the European Union, the Trump administration pursued this tri-continental strategy at the expense of the traditional transatlantic alliance, embodied in NATO, that had been the foundation for US foreign policy since the start of the Cold War.⁵⁸

That aspiration to continental hegemony lent a certain geopolitical logic to Trump’s otherwise quixotic overtures to claim Greenland, re-claim the Panama Canal, and make Canada the fifty-first state. On his sixth day in office, President Trump told the press aboard Air Force One, “I think Greenland will be worked out with us. I think we’re going to have it,” adding: “I don’t know really what claim Denmark has to it. But it would be a very unfriendly act if they didn’t allow that to happen because it’s for the protection of the free world.” Turning to his northern neighbor, Trump insisted US statehood would mean “the people of Canada would pay a much lower tax. . . . They would have no military problems.” During his first weeks in office, President Trump imposed a 25 percent duty on all imports from Canada and Mexico, which was quickly followed by a blizzard of similar imposts that sparked multiple trade disputes with once-close allies. In response, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau charged, in an emotional speech, that Trump wants “to see a total collapse of the Canadian economy, because that’ll make it easier to annex us.” Similarly, in his first trip as secretary of state, Marco Rubio swept into Panama City, where he warned its president to reduce Chinese influence over the canal or face “potential retaliation from the United States,” prompting Panama to placate Trump by withdrawing from Beijing’s global Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁹

In sum, Trump’s vision for a continental Fortress America would annex the northern lands of Canada and Greenland while sealing off Mexico, for ethnic reasons, as separate but subordinate. Instead of past reliance on global, multilateral defense pacts, the administration would, with the country’s Arctic approaches under its control, draw a defensive frontier around Greenland and through the North Atlantic, secure the Panama Canal

as a southern bastion, and maintain the current military penumbra over the entire Pacific. Every major component of this strategy is, of course, laden with potential for conflict, particularly the administration's plans for the Pacific, which will face a continuing challenge from China.

In pursuit of his tri-continental strategy, President Trump, at the start of his second term, systematically demolished the institutional pillars of the rules-based international order that the US had tried to advance since the end of World War II. Standing in the Rose Garden on his April 2nd "Liberation Day," Trump proclaimed a roster of tariffs reaching as high as 84 percent that, said *Foreign Policy* magazine, "will shatter the world economy" the US has built since 1945, while the respected *Economist* observed that it "heralds America's total abandonment of the world trading order." After calling the US Agency for International Development "corrupt" and falsely claiming that he had "stopped \$50 million being sent to Gaza to buy condoms for Hamas," Trump abolished most of its global humanitarian initiatives—thereby cutting 5,800 programs that provided food rations for a million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, malaria prevention for 53 million people, and polio immunization for millions of children worldwide. In a further flurry of executive orders, he also shut down the global broadcaster Voice of America with a spurious claim that it was "radical," withdrew from the World Health Organization (WHO), and quit the Paris climate accords for a second time. With that latter move, the US abdicated any leadership role in the most consequential issue facing the international community, leaving a void that China could readily fill by offering stable world leadership in contrast to the "aggressive unilateralism" of Trump's second term. More broadly, the closure of most USAID programs crippled the country's "soft power," ceding China the role as prime development partner in at least forty countries worldwide.⁶⁰

Reflecting his aversion to alliances, Trump's first major foreign policy initiative was a unilateral attempt to negotiate an end to the Russia-Ukraine war. On February 12, 2025, he launched peace talks through a "lengthy and highly productive" phone call with Russian President Putin. Within days, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced that "returning to Ukraine's pre-2014 borders is an unrealistic objective" and Trump himself added that NATO membership for Kyiv was equally unrealistic—in effect, making what a senior Swedish diplomat called "very major concessions" to Russia even before the talks started. By month's end, tensions from that tilt toward

Moscow culminated in a televised Oval Office meeting, with Trump berating Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, saying: “You’re either going to make a deal or we’re out, and if we’re out, you’ll fight it out. I don’t think it’s going to be pretty.” As Putin rebuffed his diplomatic initiatives, Trump moved to a more neutral position, repairing relations with Zelensky and resuming his erratic efforts to broker a peace deal. On balance, however, Trump’s essentially unilateral approach not only weakened Ukraine’s ability to defend itself, but it also disregarded and even degraded NATO, which had, for the previous three years, expanded its membership and military capability by supporting Ukraine’s resistance to Russia’s invasion.⁶¹

Recoiling from the “initial shock” of this utterly unprecedented breach, Europeans quickly appropriated \$160 billion to build up their own arms industry in collaboration with both Canada and Ukraine, and in June signed a defense pact with Canada—thereby reducing their dependence on US weaponry. Even if his administration does not formally withdraw from NATO, Trump’s episodic hostility, particularly toward its crucial mutual-defense clause, may yet serve to weaken if not eviscerate the alliance.⁶²

In the Asia-Pacific region, Trump’s new global strategy strained long-standing US alliances. There, the American presence rested, at the start of his second term, on three sets of mutual-defense pacts: the AUKUS entente with Australia and Britain, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (with Australia, India, and Japan), and a chain of bilateral defense agreements stretching along the Pacific littoral from Japan to the Philippines. Trump’s disdain for military alliances, his penchant for abusing allies, and his imposition of punitive tariffs on their exports will likely weaken such ties and thus American power in the region.⁶³

Although his first administration had famously waged a trade war with Beijing, Trump’s attitude toward the island of Taiwan has been more ambiguous. “I think, Taiwan should pay us for defense,” he said during the presidential campaign in June 2024, adding: “Taiwan doesn’t give us anything.”⁶⁴ Once in office, however, his defense secretary issued an interim strategic guidance stating that “denial of a Chinese *fait accompli* seizure of Taiwan . . . is the Department’s sole pacing scenario,” requiring the US shift some of its forces from Europe to Asia. In similar signs of commitment to the island, the administration noisily raised tariffs and technology controls on China while quietly releasing \$870 million in

military aid for Taiwan. Should Beijing indeed attack Taiwan outright or, as appears more probable, impose a crippling economic blockade on the island, Washington would be faced with a difficult choice between a strategic retreat or a devastating war with China.⁶⁵

However it might happen, the loss of that island would break the US position along the Pacific littoral and, as noted above, possibly push its naval forces back to a “second island chain” running from Japan to Guam, a major blow to America’s geopolitical position in the Pacific. Even within Trump’s tri-continental strategy, the Western Pacific remains a contested terrain between Beijing and Washington, fraught with the possibility of armed conflict in that continuing great-power rivalry called the new Cold War.

Since it has little chance of success, Trump’s attempt at a grand strategy will likely leave a residue of ruin—corroding US global power, compromising the current world order, and harming countless millions worldwide who once benefitted from America’s humanitarian aid. His attempt at consolidating control over North America soon encountered determined resistance in Ottawa, which countered with a strong bid to join Europe’s accelerated development of its own defense industries. While the Trump administration’s aversion to formal alliances and its imposition of protective tariffs will likely weaken diplomatic ties to traditional allies in Asia and Europe, both China and Russia will correspondingly gain influence in their respective regions. From a strategic perspective, this start of a staged US retreat from its military bastions at the antipodes of Eurasia in Western Europe and East Asia will weaken its long-standing influence over that vast landmass, which remains the epicenter of geopolitical power. Not only has Trump accelerated the decline of America’s raw strategic power, but he has also subverted the liberal world order that Washington built at the start of the Cold War, which was grounded in free trade, multilateral alliances, and inviolable national sovereignty. Had that global system survived, it might have softened America’s descent and allowed a maximization of its international influence in a more multipolar world. With its military alliances compromised, its trade relations roiled by tariff wars, and its democratic world order fraying, US global power will, in all probability, be significantly reduced by the end of Trump’s term in 2029.

Taking a longer view, the three crises that erupted after 2020 around the edge of Eurasia in Ukraine, Taiwan, and Gaza were simply the most recent

manifestations of an underlying geopolitical volatility across that vast continent that any would-be great power would have to master in its exercise of global hegemony. “The centre of gravity in modern world history lies in Eurasia,” argues the historian John Darwin, “in the troubled, conflicted, connected, and intimate relations of its great cultures and states.” In that sprawling landmass which has served, since the fifteenth century, as the fulcrum for global power, conflict and crisis are constants. The variable in the life of any empire is its capacity to manage crises—most critically, what Darwin calls “the shifting balance of wealth and power between Eurasia’s main elements [which] form the hammer and anvil of modern world history.”⁶⁶

The course of every modern world empire has involved a succession of crises—usually mastered in its vigorous earlier years, only to be ever more disastrously mishandled in its era of decline. Empires do not just fall like toppled trees. Instead, they weaken slowly as a concatenation of crises drains their strength and confidence until they suddenly begin to disintegrate. So it was with the British, French, and Soviet empires; so it may well be for American global hegemony.

As I write this, looming on history’s horizon are three foreign policy crises in Gaza, Taiwan, and Ukraine that could cumulatively turn a slow imperial recession into an all-too-rapid decline, if not collapse. And even if those crises were somehow resolved successfully, the next set, or the one after that could indeed accelerate America’s retreat from Eurasia in ways that would mark an end to its near-century of global dominion.

THE COLD WAR’S LESSONS AND LEGACY

History, particularly when as bitterly contested as the Cold War was, offers many different lessons, depending on one’s political viewpoint. But here are some possibilities that might merit consideration.

Following those men on the spot into their clandestine shadowlands throughout the four decades of the Cold War should remind us that the pursuit of imperial power that was at the heart of that conflict has always been a distinctly dirty business. In those years, regimes on both sides of the Iron Curtain diverted their society’s resources into costly, ill-considered nuclear arsenals, lethal covert operations, and wars that killed an estimated

twenty million people. Left to set their own priorities, both capitalist and communist leaders became deeply absorbed in that geopolitical rivalry, practicing a relentless, ruthless realpolitik in a headlong pursuit of victory. At certain critical points in the Cold War's history, however, a succession of mass movements managed to deter the superpowers from their inherent irrationality—notably, the youth revolt against the Vietnam War in the 1960s; the global anti-nuclear, anti-apartheid, and “sanctuary” movements during the 1980s; and, at the end of that decade, the “people power” protests that challenged authoritarian rule on both sides of the Iron Curtain and helped end the Cold War.

Today, a new Cold War seems to be leading the world's great powers into another round of irrationality and misguided priorities. While Beijing, Moscow, and Washington continue to prepare for armed conflict, in a significant fashion, however, the world is burning. Instead of pooling scarce resources to cope with the challenge of climate change, the planet's leading nations have been continually raising their military budgets, notably a 13 percent increase in spending on nuclear weapons in 2023 alone. To keep pace with China and Russia in a great-power rivalry that is clearly becoming a new Cold War, the US began revamping its nuclear triad in 2010 at a projected cost of \$1.7 trillion over thirty years.⁶⁷ With global warming breaking through the barrier of a 1.5°C temperature rise since pre-industrial levels and bound for 2.0°C and beyond, a warming planet will continue to produce ever more extreme heat, erratic rainfall, rising seas, devastating fires and floods, and violent storms that should ideally be managed through a maximum international effort.

As the source of a combined 45 percent of the world's total carbon dioxide emissions in 2022, China and the United States should ideally be cooperating in a search for innovative technologies and other ways of reducing such heat-inducing gasses that threaten our survival, instead of competing to expand their naval armadas and nuclear arsenals.⁶⁸ As the climate crisis continues to unfold, damaging the quality of life in communities around the globe, absorption in military rivalries is a distraction humanity can ill afford.

Though much needs to be done, recent youth activism has already pressed individual nations and the international community to prioritize climate change, much as the baby boom generation once challenged the Cold War's militarism. As we have learned from the old Cold War, peaceful

protests can give voice to broader public concerns, raise issues beyond the constraints of state policy, and help societies move in more creative directions. At a time when much of the world is faced with a choice between collective action on climate change and another round of rising military expenditures for a new Cold War, sustained activism could well advance policies critical for humanity's well-being. Once again, it is a time for ordinary citizens, led by the young with their sense of possibilities, to take history in their hands and struggle for a common future.

Just as rivalry with the Soviet Union shaped the lives of my own baby boom generation born at the start of the original Cold War in 1946, so this new Cold War will likely shape the lives and life choices of younger generations. With all that we have tried to learn about the old Cold War, its geopolitics, and high human costs, hopefully readers, particularly younger readers, will feel a bit better equipped to navigate the tempestuous decades that are their future, to turn themselves into so many men—and women—on the spot in a global struggle against climate change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My debts in completing this ambitious project are many. Most importantly, I have worked at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for over thirty years. There, bolted to the wall of the administration building atop Bascom Hill, is a bronze plaque asserting the university's commitment to a "fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found." Though that statement was made more than a century ago, it still somehow fosters a climate of critical inquiry that made this book possible.

In drafting this manuscript, a talented history graduate student, Christopher Hulshof, was most helpful, sharing documents from both the Hoover Institution library and the British archives in London. When I finished a draft of the chapter on Indonesia in 1965–66, Hulshof, along with John Roosa, a leading Indonesia specialist who is also a former graduate student, gave that text a careful, critical reading. Another history graduate student and Air Force officer, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Jackson, introduced me to the recurring role of airpower in covert operations during the Cold War and shared primary documents from the US National Archives about the Philippines. Weekly conversations with an undergraduate honor's student, Rachel E. Lynch, helped refine my thinking about geopolitics, and fellow historian Milan Hauner kindly shared a copy of his seminal work on geopolitics. Wisconsin's History Department, led by Leslie Abadie and Yasi Rezai, provided funding for the excellent maps drawn by three student workers at the Cartography Lab, Will McAllister, Will Clancy, and Gareth Baldrice-Franklin, under the supervision of Alicia Cowart.

When a first draft was done, a Wisconsin graduate student in Latin American history, Henry Bielenberg, reviewed every chapter and made suggestions for changes major and minor, as did his colleague Ethan Moreland. Elsewhere at the university, Professor Gay Seidman drew upon her lifelong engagement with southern Africa for a close, critical reading of that chapter, as did historian David Gibbs for the Congo chapter. During the final editing, our university's Center for Southeast Asian Studies invited me

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My family has been very supportive of this project. My sister, Lady Margarita Ground, was the book’s first reader, patiently, painstakingly reviewing successive drafts for clarity and continuity. My eldest son, Matt McCoy, used his graphics skills to prepare the photos for publication. My partner, Mary McCoy, listened to my first thoughts on the book’s myriad topics, offering criticism and insights reflected in the text.

When this book was half done in early 2024, Professor Rebecca Slayton invited me to lecture at Cornell University’s Reppy Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, where an engaged audience pressed for a more critical look at the interactions between foreign agents and indigenous societies, particularly in Southeast Asia—thanks to the presence of regional specialists Magnus Fiskesjö, Tamara Loos, and Thomas Pepinsky. When a first draft was done, I addressed a reunion of my classmates (Class of 1964) at a small New England secondary school, Kent School, who asked insightful questions that led to some significant revisions. I am also indebted to two teachers at that school—my coach Lee Ahlborn, who advised me one day on the wrestling mats that I had the makings of an academic, and my English teacher Robert Cluett, who taught me the skills of clear prose and close textual analysis to pursue that career.

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APPENDIX

MEN ON THE SPOT, COLD WAR, 1946–91

<i>Name</i>	<i>Nation</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Military Service</i>	<i>Cold War Service</i>	<i>Died</i>
James Van Fleet	USA	1892	US Army, 1915–53, WWI, WWII, Korea	Greek Civil War, 1948–50 Korean War, 1951–53	1992
Gerald Templer	UK	1898	Army, WWI, WWII	UK Occupation Germany, Malayan Emergency	1979
Edward Lansdale	USA	1908	Army/OSS-WWII Air Force, 1947–63	CIA, 1947–63 Philippines, Vietnam, Cuba	1987
Roger Trinquier	France	1908	Army, 1932–61 WWII	French Army Indochina, Algeria, Congo	1986
Antoine Savani	France	1909	Army WWII	French Army Intelligence Saigon, 1946–55	1985
Maurice Belleux	France	1909	Air Force, 1932–61 WWII	SDECE Indochina, 1947–54	2002
Irving Brown	USA	1911	Army/OSS-WWII	AFL-CIO & CIA France/Europe, 1945–86	1989
Santo Trafficante Jr.	USA	1914	n.a.	Castro Assassination	1987
Kermit Roosevelt Jr.	USA	1916	OSS-WWII	CIA, 1950–58 Egypt, Iran Coup	2000
Thomas Karamessines	USA	1917	Army/OSS-WWII	CIA, 1947–73 Greece, Italy, Chile	1978

<i>Name</i>	<i>Nation</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Military Service</i>	<i>Cold War Service</i>	<i>Died</i>
E. Howard Hunt	USA	1918	Navy/QSS-WWII	CIA, 1950–70 Guatemala, Cuba	2007
Norman Reddaway	UK	1919	UK Army-WWII	Foreign Office, 1946–78 IRD-Singapore, 1965–66	1999
Raymond Westerling	Holland	1919	UK-WWII	Dutch Army, 1945–50 Indonesia	1987
Michael Hoare	UK	1919	UK-WWII	Mercenary Commander Congo, 1961–67	2020
Lucien Conein	USA	1919	QSS-WWII	CIA, 1947–68 Vietnam	1998
Cord Meyer	USA	1920	Marines-WWII	CIA, 1951–77 Media Manipulation, USA	2001
Lawrence Devlin	USA	1922	Army-WWII	CIA, 1949–74 Congo (1960–67), Laos	2008
Norman Darbyshire	UK	1924	Special Operations Executive, WWII	MI6, 1945–78 Iran, Egypt, Bahrain	1993
Anthony Poshepny	USA	1924	Marines-WWII	CIA, 1950–74 Korea, Tibet, Laos	2003
J. William Lair	USA	1924	Army-WWII	CIA, 1949–77 Thailand, Laos (1961–68)	2014
Pham Xuan An	Vietnam	1927	Viet Minh-WWII	North Vietnamese Army Saigon Espionage, 1954–76	2006
Bob Denard	France	1929	French Marines Colonial Police	SDECE-Mercenary Gabon, Congo	2007
Jorge Risquet	Cuba	1930	Cuban Revolution, 1958–59	Military Adviser, 1965–91 Congo, Angola, Namibia	2015
William Young	USA	1934	Army-Germany	CIA, 1959–68 Laos	2011
John Stockwell	USA	1937	Marines	CIA, 1964–76 Congo, Vietnam, Angola	--
J. Vinton Lawrence	USA	1939	Army	CIA, 1960–69 Laos (1962–66)	2016

<i>Name</i>	<i>Nation</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Military Service</i>	<i>Cold War Service</i>	<i>Died</i>
Howard Hart	USA	1940	n.a.	CIA, 1965–84 Afghan War (1981–84)	2017
Michael V. Townley	Chile	1942	n.a.	DINA Assassin, 1974–78 Italy, Argentina, USA	--
James Steele	USA	n.d.	Army-Vietnam War	Army, 1970–94 El Salvador (1984–86)	--
Vic Raphael	USA	ca. 1946	Army Intelligence	Army, ca. 1971–99 Philippines (ca. 1985–87)	--

CIA (*Central Intelligence Agency*); DINA (*Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional*); IRD (*Information Research Department*); OSS (*Office of Strategic Services*); SDECE (*Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage*); MI6 (*Secret Intelligence Service*).

NOTES

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CHAPTER 6: END OF EMPIRE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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CHAPTER 8: COLD WAR COMES TO AFRICA

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CHAPTER 9: THE VIETNAM WAR

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CHAPTER 10: JAKARTA IS COMING

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CHAPTER 11: CIA COUP IN CHILE

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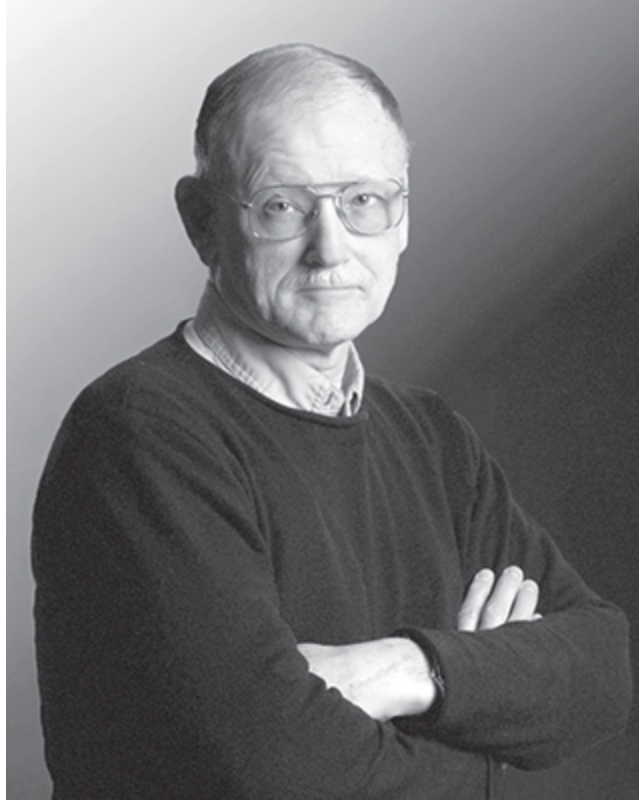


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